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BIRTHRIGHT
SCALES OF THE SERPENT
THE VEILED PROPHECY
RICHARD A. KNAAK

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THE SIN WAR

BOOK ONE

BIRTHRIGHT

RICHARD A. KNAAK



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THE SIN WAR

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PROLOGUE

The world was young, then, and only a few knew it as Sanctuary or knew that not only did angels and demons exist, but some of them had caused Sanctuary to be in the first place. The names Inarius, Diablo, Rathma, Mephisto, and Baal—to name a powerful and often dread few—had not yet been whispered on mortal lips.

In this simpler time, ignorant of the eternal battle between the High Heavens and the Burning Hells, people struggled and prospered, lived and died. They could not know that even then, the eyes of both immortal sides would soon covet their potential and thus begin a conflict that would spill over into the centuries to come.

And, of all those most terribly ignorant of Sanctuary's awful destiny, Uldyssian ul-Diomed—Uldyssian, son of Diomedes—could be said to have been the most blind. Blind, though he would be himself at the center of what scholars of the world's secret history would come to call *the Sin War*.

It was not a war in the sense of men-at-arms—though there were those, too—but rather a trying, a testing and taking, of souls. A war that would forever eradicate the innocence of Sanctuary and those inhabiting it, changing all, even those not aware.

A war that was both won...and lost...

From the Books of Kalan
First Tome, Second Leaf

ONE

The shadow fell across Uldyssian ul-Diomed's table, enveloping not only much of it, but also his hand and his as-of-yet-undrunk ale. The sandy-haired farmer did not have to look up to know who interrupted his brief respite from his day's labors. He had heard the newcomer speaking to others in the Boar's Head—the only tavern in the remote village of Seram—heard him speaking and prayed silently but vehemently that he would not come to Uldyssian's table.

It was ironic that the son of Diomedes *prayed* for the stranger to keep away, for what stood waiting for Uldyssian to look up was none other than a missionary from the Cathedral of Light. Resplendent in his collared silver-white robes—resplendent save for the ring of Seramian mud at the bottom—he no doubt awed many a fellow villager of Uldyssian's. However, his presence did nothing but dredge up terrible memories for the farmer, who now angrily fought to keep his stare fixed on the mug.

"Have you seen the *Light*, my brother?" the figure finally asked when it was clear that his potential convert planned to continue to ignore him. "Has the Word of the great Prophet touched your soul?"

"Find someone else," Uldyssian muttered, his free hand involuntarily tightening into a fist. He finally took a gulp of his ale, hoping that his remark would end the unwanted conversation. However, the missionary was not to be put off.

Setting a hand on the farmer's forearm—and thereby keeping the ale from again touching Uldyssian's lips—the pale young man said, "If not yourself alone, think of your loved ones! Would you forsake their souls as—"

The farmer roared, his face red with a rage no longer held in check. In a single motion, Uldyssian leapt up and seized the startled missionary by the collar. As the table tipped over, the ale fell and splattered on the planked floor, unnoticed by its former drinker. Around the room, other patrons, including a few rare travelers passing through, eyed the confrontation with concern and interest...and from experience chose to keep out of it. Some of the locals, who knew the son of Diomedes well, shook their heads or muttered to one another at the newcomer's poor choice of subjects.

The missionary was a hand taller than Uldyssian, no small man himself at just over six feet, but the broad-shouldered farmer

outweighed him by half again as much and all of that muscle from day after day of tilling the soil or seeing to the animals. Uldyssian was a square-jawed man with the bearded, rough-hewn features typical of the region west of the great city-state of Kehjan, the “jewel” of the eastern half of the world. Deep-brown eyes burned into the more pale ones of the gaunt—and surprisingly young—features of the Cathedral’s proselytizer.

“The souls of most of my family are beyond the Prophet’s gathering, *brother!* They died nearly ten years ago, all to plague!”

“I shall s-say a prayer for...for them—”

His words only served to infuriate Uldyssian, who had himself prayed for his parents, his elder brother, and his two sisters constantly over the months through which they had suffered. Day and night—often with no sleep in between—he had first prayed to whatever power watched over them that they recover, then, when that no longer seemed a hope, that their deaths would be swift and painless.

And that prayer, too, had gone unanswered. Uldyssian, distraught and helpless, had watched as, one by one, they died in anguish. Only he and his youngest brother, Mendeln, had survived to bury the rest.

Even then there had been missionaries and even then they had talked of the souls of his family and how their particular sects had the answers to everything. To a one, they had promised Uldyssian that, if he followed their particular path, he would find peace over his loved ones’ losses.

But Uldyssian, once a devout believer, had very vocally denounced each and every one of them. Their words rang hollow and his refusals seemed later justified when the missionaries’ sects faded away as surely as each season on the farm.

But not all. The Cathedral of Light, though only of recent origin, seemed far stronger than most of its predecessors. Indeed, it and the longer-established Temple of the Triune seemed to be quickly becoming the two dominant forces seeking the souls of Kehjan’s people. To Uldyssian, the fervent enthusiasm with which both sought out new converts bordered on a strenuous competition much in conflict with their spiritual messages.

And that was yet another reason Uldyssian would have no part of either.

“Pray for yourself, not for me and mine,” he growled. The missionary’s eyes bulged as Uldyssian easily hefted him by the collar off the floor.

The squat, balding figure behind the counter slipped out to intervene. Tibion was several years senior and no match against Uldyssian, but he had been Diomedes’s good friend and so his words

had effect on the furious farmer. “Uldyssian! Mind my establishment if’n you can’t mind yourself, eh?”

Uldyssian hesitated, the proprietor’s words cutting through his anguish. His gaze swept from the pale face before him to Tibion’s round one, then back again.

A frustrated scowl still on his face, he let the figure in his grip drop in an undignified heap on the floor.

“Uldyssian—” Tibion started.

But the son of Diomedes did not wait to hear the rest. Hands shaking, he strode out of the Boar’s Head, his heavy, worn leather boots clattering hard on the well-trod planks. Outside, the air was crisp, which helped soothe Uldyssian some. Almost immediately, he began to regret his actions within. Not the reasons for them, but that he had acted so before many of those who knew him...and not for the first time.

Still, the presence of the Cathedral’s acolyte in Seram grated on his heart. Uldyssian was now a man who only believed in what his eyes showed him and what his hands could touch. He could see the changes in the sky and so tell when he needed to rush his work in the field or whether time enough remained to complete his task at a more moderate pace. The crops his work brought forth from the soil fed him and others. These were things he could trust, not the muttered praying of clerics and missionaries that had done nothing for his family but give them false hope.

Seram was a village of some two hundred folk, small by many standards, of reasonable size by others. Uldyssian could have paced its length in as many breaths, if that much. His farm lay two miles to the north of Seram. Once a week, Uldyssian went into the village to get what supplies he needed, always allowing himself the short break for food and drink at the tavern. His meal he had eaten and his ale was lost, which left only his tasks to complete before he departed again.

In addition to the tavern, which also acted as an inn, there were only four other buildings of consequence in Seram—the meeting house, the trading station, the village Guard quarters, and the smithy. All shared the same general design as the rest of the structures of Seram, with the roofs pointed and thatched, and the bodies wooden planks over a frame whose base was built of several layers of stone and clay. As was typical in most areas under the influence of Kehjan, the windows of each were arched sharply at the top and always numbered three on a side. In truth, from a distance it was impossible to tell one building from another.

Mud caked his boots as he walked, Seram too provincial to have paved streets or even stone ones. There was a small, dry path to the opposite side from where Uldyssian trod, but at the moment, he had

no patience for it and, besides, as a farmer, he was used to being one with the soil.

At the eastern edge of Seram—and thus nearest to Kehjan—stood the trading station. The station was, other than the tavern, the busiest of places in Seram. Here it was that locals brought in their goods to trade for other necessities or to even sell to passing merchants. When there were new items in stock, a blue banner would be raised by the doorway up front, and as he approached, Uldyssian saw Cyrus's night-tressed daughter, Serenthia, doing just that. Cyrus and his family had run the trading station for four generations and were among the most prominent of families in the village, although they dressed no more fancy than anyone else. The trader did not look down on his customers, who were also, for the most part, his neighbors. Serenthia, for example, was clad in a simple cloth dress of brown, cut modestly at the bodice and whose bottom hem ended just above the ankle. Like most villagers, she wore sensible boots designed for both riding and walking through the muddy ruts in the main street.

"Something of interest?" he called to Serenthia, trying to focus on other matters in order to forget both the incident and the images from the past it had conjured up.

Cyrus's daughter turned at the sound of his voice, her thick, long hair fluttering about. With her bright blue eyes, ivory skin, and naturally red lips, Uldyssian felt certain that all she needed was a proper gown to allow her to compete with the best of the blue-blood females in Kehjan itself. The unadorned dress did not hide her curves, nor did it detract in any way from the graceful manner in which she somehow moved regardless of the terrain.

"Uldyssian! Have you been here all day?"

There was that in her tone that all but made the farmer grimace. Serenthia was more than a decade younger than him and he had seen her grow up from a child to a woman. To him, she was nearly one of the sisters that he had lost. However, to her, Uldyssian evidently seemed much more. She had turned down the attentions of younger and more affluent farmers than him, not to mention the flirtations of several visiting merchants. The only other man in whom she showed any interest was Achilios, Uldyssian's good friend and the best hunter in Seram, but whether that was because of his ties to the farmer, it was difficult to say.

"I arrived just past the first hour of day," he replied. As he neared, he caught glimpses of at least three wagons behind Cyrus's establishment. "A fair-sized caravan for Seram. What goes on?"

She finished hoisting up the banner, then tethered the rope. Gazing over her shoulder at the wagons, Serenthia said, "They got lost, actually. They were bound for passage through Tulisam."

Tulisam was the next nearest habitation, a town at least five times as great as Seram. It was also more on the route from Kehjan proper to the sea, where the master ports were.

Uldyssian grunted. "The handler must be a novice."

"Well, whatever the cause, they've decided to trade some. Father's trying to hide his excitement. They've got some beautiful things, Uldyssian!"

To the son of Diomedes, beautiful things generally consisted of strong, sturdy tools or a newborn calf that had its health. He started to speak, then noticed someone walking by the wagons.

She was dressed akin to a noble of one of the Houses that sought to fill the gap of leadership caused by the recent infighting between the ruling mage clans. Her lush golden hair was bound up behind her head with a silver band, allowing full view of the regal, ivory face. Glittering green eyes surveyed her surroundings. Slim, perfect lips parted as the woman, the shoulders of her flowing emerald gown covered by a fur, viewed the landscape to the east of Seram. The bodice of the gown was cinched tight and although her clothing was the epitome of the ruling castes, it left no doubt that she was very much female.

Just as the arresting figure began to glance in Uldyssian's direction, Serentia abruptly took him by the arm. "You should come inside and see for yourself, Uldyssian."

As she steered him toward the twin wooden doors, the farmer took a quick look back, but of the noblewoman he saw no sign. Had he not known himself to be incapable of such elaborate fancies, Uldyssian would have almost believed her to be a product of his imagination.

Serentia all but pulled him inside, Cyrus's daughter shutting the doors behind them particularly hard. Inside, her father glanced up from a conversation with a cowled merchant. The two older men appeared to be haggling over a bundle of what the farmer thought rather luxurious purple cloth.

"Aah! Good Uldyssian!" The trader prefaced everyone's name save those of his family with the word, something that always made Uldyssian smile. Cyrus did not even seem to notice that he did it. "How fare you and your brother?"

"We...we're fine, Master Cyrus."

"Good, good." And with that, the trader went back to his business. With but a ring of silvering hair around his otherwise clean pate and his scholarly eyes, Cyrus looked more like a cleric to the farmer than any of those wearing such robes. In fact, Uldyssian had heard far more sensible words from the man. He respected Cyrus greatly, in part because of how the trader, more educated than most in Seram, had

taken Mendeln under his wing.

Thinking of his brother, who spent more time in this very building than he did at the farm, Uldyssian glanced around. Although Mendeln would have been clad in garments akin to his brother's—cloth tunic, kilt, and boots—and resembled his brother somewhat in the eyes and broad nose, one look at him by anyone would raise the question of whether he was actually a farmer. In truth, although he did help out at the farm, working the land was clearly not Mendeln's calling. He was always interested in studying *things*, be they bugs burrowing in the ground or words in some parchment loaned him by Cyrus.

Uldyssian could read and write, too, and was proud of that achievement, but he saw only the practical aspects of such a thing. There were times when pacts had to be made that required writing things down and then making certain that they said what they were supposed to. That, the older brother understood. Simply reading for reading's sake or studying merely to learn something of no use in their daily tasks...such a desire evaded Uldyssian.

He did not see his brother, who had this time ridden in with him, but something else caught his attention, a sight that brought back to him fully and painfully the memory of what had happened in the Boar's Head. At first glimpse, he thought the figure a companion of the missionary he had accosted, but then, as the young woman turned more in his direction, the farmer saw that she wore an entirely different set of robes. These were of a deep azure and had upon the breast a golden, stylized ram with great curled horns. Below the ram was an iridescent triangle whose tip jutted up just below the animal's hooves.

Her hair had been shorn to shoulder length and the face that the tresses framed was round, full of youth, and highly attractive. Yet there was, in Uldyssian's mind, something missing that removed for him any desire for her. It was as if she was an empty shell, not a whole person.

He had seen her like before. Zealous, an absolute believer in her faith. He had also seen the robes before, and the fact that she was alone made him suddenly eye the room with dread. They *never* traveled alone, always in threes. One for each of their order...

Serenthia was trying to show him some feminine bauble, but Uldyssian heard only her voice, not her words. He considered trying to back out of the chamber.

Then another figure joined the first, this one a middle-aged man of strong bearing and patrician features who, with his cleft chin and strong brow, would have appealed to the fairer sex as much as the girl would have the males. He wore a tight-collared golden robe that also bore the triangle, but this time above it was a green leaf.

The third of their band was nowhere to be seen, but Uldyssian knew that he or she could not be far away. The servants of the Temple of the Triune did not stay separated long. While a missionary from the Cathedral often worked alone, the Triune's acolytes acted in concert with one another. They preached the way of the Three, the guiding spirits—Bala, Dialon, and Mefis—who supposedly watched over a mortal like loving parents or kindly teachers. Dialon was the spirit of Determination, hence the stubborn ram. Bala stood for Creation, represented by the leaf. Mefis, whose servant was missing, was Love. The acolytes of that order bore upon their breast a red circle, the common Kehjan emblem for the heart.

Having heard the preachings of all three orders before and not wanting to risk a repeat of the debacle in the tavern, Uldyssian tried to shift into the shadows. Serenthia had finally realized that Uldyssian no longer listened to her. She put her hands on her hips and gave him the stare that, when she had been a child, had made him give in to her way.

"Uldyssian! I thought you wanted to see—"

He cut her off. "Serry, I've got to be going. Did your brothers gather what I asked for earlier?"

She pursed her lips as she thought. Uldyssian eyed the two missionaries, who seemed engrossed in some conversation. Both looked oddly disoriented, as if something had not gone as they had assumed it would.

"Thiel said nothing to me or else I'd have known you were in Seram before. Let me go find him and ask."

"I'll come with you." Anything to avoid the dogs of the Triune. The Temple had been established some years before the Cathedral, but now the two appeared more or less even in their influence. It was said that the High Magistrate of Kehjan was now a convert of the former, while the Lord General of the Kehjan Guard was rumored to be a member of the latter. The disarray within the mage clans—often bordering on war of late—had turned many to the comfort of one message or another.

But before Serenthia could lead them into the back, Cyrus called for his daughter. She gave Uldyssian an apologetic look.

"Wait here. I won't be long."

"I'll go look for Thiel myself," he suggested.

Serenthia must have caught his quick glance at the missionaries. Her expression grew reproving. "Uldyssian, not again."

"Serry—"

"*Uldyssian*, those people are messengers of holy orders! They mean you no harm! If you would just open yourself up to hearing them! I'm

not suggesting you join one or the other, but the messages both preach are worthy of your attention.”

She had reprimanded him like this before, just after he had stood up in the tavern after the last visit by missionaries from the Triune and gone on at length about the lack of need for *any* of their ilk in the lives of the common folk. Did the acolytes offer to help shear the sheep or bring in the crops? Did they help wash the mud-soaked clothes or lend their hands fixing the fences? No. Uldyssian had pointed out then, as he had on other occasions, that all they came to do was whisper in the ears of people that *their* sect was better than the other sect. This to people who barely understood the concept of angels and demons, much less believed in them.

“They can say all the pretty words they want, Serry, but all I see is them contesting against one another, with how many fools they can brand as their own as what decides the winner.”

“Serenthia!” Cyrus called again. “Come here, lass!”

“Father needs me,” she said with a rueful look. “I’ll be right back. Please, Uldyssian, behave yourself.”

The farmer watched her hurry off, then tried to fix his attention on some of the items for sale or barter in the station. There were tools of all sorts that could be useful on the farm, including hoes, shovels, and a variety of hammers. Uldyssian ran his finger over the edge of a new iron sickle. The craftsmanship was the best available in a place such as Seram, although he had heard that in some estate farms near Kehjan proper a few lords had their workers wielding ones tipped with steel. Such a concept had far more impact on Uldyssian than any words concerning spirits or souls.

Then someone quickly strode past him, heading into the back. He had a glimpse of golden hair bound up and a hint of a smile that the son of Diomedes could have sworn was directed toward him.

Without at first realizing it, Uldyssian followed. The noblewoman vanished through the back door as if the station were her own home.

He slipped through a moment later...and at first saw no sign of her. What he did see was that his wagon was indeed full. There was no sign of Thiel, but that was not uncommon. Serenthia’s eldest brother was likely assisting with some other labor.

Having already dealt with the matter of payment, Uldyssian headed toward the wagon. However, as he neared, he suddenly saw a flash of green by the horse.

It was her. The noblewoman stood on the other side of the animal, murmuring something to it while she caressed the muzzle with one slender hand. Uldyssian’s horse appeared mesmerized by her, standing as motionless as a statue. The old male was an ornery beast and only

those who knew him well could approach him without the danger of a bite. That this woman could do so spoke volumes about her to the farmer.

She noticed him in turn. A smile lit up her face. To Uldyssian, her eyes seemed to glow.

“Forgive me...is this your horse?”

“It is, my lady...and you’re lucky still to have more than one hand. He likes to bite.”

She caressed the muzzle again. The beast continued to stand still. “Oh, he wouldn’t bite me.” The woman leaned her face close to the muzzle. “Would you?”

Uldyssian half-started toward her, suddenly fearful that she would be proven wrong. However, again, nothing happened.

“I once owned a horse that looked very much like him,” she continued. “I miss him so.”

Suddenly recalling where they were, Uldyssian said, “Mistress, you shouldn’t be here. You should stay with the caravan.” Sometimes, travelers journeyed with merchants in order to make use of the protection of the latter’s guards. Uldyssian could only assume that this was the case with her, although so far it seemed that she was without any escort. Even with the protection of the caravan, a young woman traveling alone risked danger. “You don’t want to be left behind.”

“But I am not going with the caravan,” the noblewoman murmured. “I am not going anywhere at all.”

He could not believe that he had heard her correctly. “My lady, you must be joking! There’s nothing for you in a place like Seram...”

“There’s nothing for me in any other place...why not Seram, then?” Her mouth curled up in a hesitant smile. “And you need not keep calling me ‘my lady’ or ‘mistress.’ You may call me Lylia...”

Uldyssian opened his mouth to answer, only to hear the door swing open behind him and Serenthia’s voice call, “There you are! Did you find Thiel?”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “No, but everything’s here, Serry.”

His horse suddenly snorted, then shied from him. Grabbing the bit, Uldyssian did his best to calm the cantankerous beast. The horse’s eyes were wide and his nostrils flared; to his master he seemed startled or frightened. That made little sense, for the creature liked Serenthia more than he did Uldyssian. As for the noblewoman, she—

She was nowhere to be *seen*. Uldyssian surreptitiously surveyed the area, wondering how she could have possibly slipped away so quickly and without a sound. He had a fair view for some distance, but all he saw were a few other wagons. Unless she had climbed into one of the

covered ones, the farmer could not possibly fathom what had happened to her.

Serenthia walked up to him, mildly curious at his behavior. "What are you looking for? Is something you needed missing, after all?"

He recovered enough to answer, "No...as I said, it's all here."

A familiar—and undesired—shape slipped through the doorway. The missionary glanced around as if searching for something or someone in particular.

"Yes, Brother Atilus?" asked Serenthia.

"I seek our Brother Caligio. Is he not in here?"

"No, brother, there's only the two of us."

Brother Atilus eyed Uldyssian without the usual religious fervor the farmer was accustomed to seeing from his ilk. Instead, the missionary's gaze held a hint of what seemed...suspicion?

Bowing his head to Serenthia, Atilus withdrew. Cyrus's daughter turned her attention back to Uldyssian. "Do you have to leave so soon? I know you feel uncomfortable around Brother Atilus and the others, but...couldn't you stay and visit with me a bit longer?"

For reasons that he could not explain, Uldyssian felt unsettled. "No...no, I've got to head back. Speaking of looking for someone, have you seen Mendeln? I expected him to be with your father."

"Oh, I should've told you! Achilios stopped by just a short time earlier. He had something he wanted to show to Mendeln and the two of them headed off for the western forest."

Uldyssian grunted. Mendeln had promised that he would be ready at the proper time to ride home with him. Generally, his brother was very good about keeping his word, but Achilios must have come across something unusual. Mendeln's greatest weakness was his incessant curiosity, something the hunter should have known better than to encourage. Once started on one of his studies, the younger son of Diomedes lost all track of time.

But although Uldyssian would not leave without his one remaining sibling, he did not want to be anywhere near the Triune's followers. "I can't stay. I'll lead the wagon out to the forest and hope that I find them. Should Mendeln somehow return here without me seeing him —"

"I'll tell him where you wait, yes." Serenthia did not attempt to hide her disappointment.

Feeling uncomfortable for a more normal reason, the farmer gave her a brief—and merely *friendly*—hug, and climbed aboard. Cyrus's daughter stepped back as he urged the old horse on.

He looked back in her direction as the wagon moved and the intensity of his expression made Serenthia's own countenance light up.

Uldyssian paid her reaction no mind, for his thoughts were not on the trader's raven-haired daughter.

No, the face that had burned itself into his thoughts was that of another, one whose tresses were *golden*.

And one whose caste was far, far above that of a simple farmer.

Two

Mendeln was well aware that his brother would be angry with him, but his curiosity had complete rein of him now. Besides, it was all Achilios's fault, truly, and Achilios, at least, should have known better.

There was a good nine years' difference between the surviving sons of Diomedes, enough that in some ways the pair might as well have been considered other than brothers. Uldyssian often acted more like Mendeln's uncle or, indeed, their *father*. In fact, from what Mendeln could vaguely recall of his sire—combined with what Cyrus, Tibion, and a few elders had told him over the years—Uldyssian could have passed for Diomedes's twin in both look and manner.

Mendeln shared some of his brother's features, but was half a foot shorter than Uldyssian and, while strengthened by the necessities of farm life, was not nearly as mighty, either. His countenance was narrower and longer—from his mother's side, he was told—and he had eyes that were black and glistened like dark jewels. From where those had come, no one in the village could say, but Mendeln had learned early on that, if he stared, he could unsettle most anyone save his brother and the man now with him.

"What do you make of it?" Achilios muttered from behind.

Mendeln forced his gaze from the hunter's fascinating discovery. Achilios was a blond, wiry figure nearly as tall as Uldyssian. Unlike Mendeln, who was clad virtually identically to his brother save for the darker shading of his tunic, Achilios was dressed in a green and brown outfit consisting of jerkin and pants that allowed him to blend well into their present surroundings. He had soft leather boots designed for padding as silently through the woods as any animal. His slim frame hinted of his swiftness but belied his strength. Uldyssian's brother had tried to string and fire the great bow that was Achilios's pride and joy, tried and failed. The hawk-faced archer was not just the best at his craft among Seram's inhabitants, but—at least in Mendeln's estimation—superior to many a hunter elsewhere. He had watched Achilios match skills against veteran guards from passing caravans and never had seen him lose.

"It...looks ancient," was all Mendeln could finally answer. He felt some embarrassment; even Achilios had noticed *that*.

But the hunter nodded as if listening to a sage. Although more than half a decade older than Mendeln, he treated the youngest son of

Diomedes as if Mendeln were the fount of all the world's knowledge. That was one of the few points of frustration between Achilios and Uldyssian, who saw little practical use in most of his sibling's learning, but did at least tolerate it.

"The thing is..." The archer ran a hand through his thick, almost leonine mane. "...I've been through this area many a time and I swear that it's never been here before!"

Mendeln only nodded, his attention once more upon his companion's find. Achilios had an eye such as he could only envy, Mendeln's own vision often forcing him to peer close at parchments in order to make out the words he so cherished.

And at this particular thing, he peered especially close, for the symbols etched in its face were, in many places, worn almost clean away by weather and age. Some of them he could not have made out even if his nose had been pressed against the stone. Clearly, the object before him had suffered long the effects of nature, and yet, how could that be, when it had, by Achilios's declaration, only just appeared?

Kneeling before it, Mendeln estimated the dimensions. Just over the length of his foot on each side of the square base and, had he been standing, a hand's breadth below his knee. The flat top was roughly half the dimensions of the base. In size alone, the stone carving should have been impossible to miss seeing.

He touched the ground before it. "Nothing of recent change in the surroundings?"

"No."

Mendeln traced his fingers almost reverently over some of the more legible symbols. Legible only in that he could see them, not understand them. One prominent marking seemed to loop in and around itself, giving it no end. As Mendeln touched it, he had a sense of incredible age.

He involuntarily shook his head. *Not age*, Uldyssian's brother thought, *but agelessness*.

Mendeln's mind paused at that sudden notion, never having conceived of it before. Agelessness. How could such a thing be possible?

The stone was black, but the markings glittered as if silver. That also fascinated him, for they did not appear to have been painted so. The skill with which the entire thing had been carved bespoke an artisan far more sophisticated than could be found in Seram or even in any of the larger settlements in the entire western region.

Belatedly, Mendeln realized that Achilios was shaking him by the shoulder. He wondered why. "What?"

The archer leaned warily over him, his brow furrowed deep in

concern. "The moment you touched it, you seemed to still! You didn't blink and I'd swear you didn't breathe!"

"I...did not notice." Mendeln was tempted to touch the artifact again, fascinated to see if the same thing would happen. However, he suspected that Achilios would not like that. "Did you touch it earlier?"

There was a noticeable hesitation, then, "Yes."

"But the same thing did not happen to you, did it?"

Achilios's complexion went pale with memory. "No. No."

"Then, what? Did you feel anything?"

"I felt...I felt an emptiness, Mendeln. It reminded me of...of *death*."

As a hunter, the blond man dealt with death on an almost daily basis, usually because of the animals he killed, but occasionally because of close scrapes with wild boars, cats, or bears, where for a time he became the prey. Yet, the manner in which Achilios spoke of death now gave it a new and far more ominous connotation, one which, oddly, stirred further curiosity, not fear, in the heart of his companion.

"What *about* death?" Mendeln asked almost eagerly. "Can you describe it better? Was it—"

Achilios, expression suddenly guarded, cut him off with a sharp slash of his hand. "That's all. I went for you right after."

Clearly, there was much, much more involved, but Uldyssian's brother did not push. Perhaps he could slowly gain the information over time. For the moment, he would satisfy himself with the stone artifact. Mendeln seized a small broken branch and scraped the ground near the bottom edge. The mysterious relic appeared to be planted deep in the soil, but how far? Was there more beneath the surface than above? Again, the temptation came to touch it, this time grabbing hold with both hands in order to see if he could move the piece at all. How much more useful it would be if Mendeln could take it back to the farm so as to study it at his leisure.

Mendeln's head shot up. *The farm! Uldyssian!*

He leapt to his feet, startling the generally unperturbable Achilios. The stone's discovery seemed to have upset the archer in a way Mendeln had never seen before. Achilios was known for his fearlessness, but now he seemed to look to Mendeln for reassurance, certainly a first.

"I have to get back," he explained to the hunter. "Uldyssian will be wondering where I am." Mendeln did not like disappointing his older sibling, even though Uldyssian would not have shown any such emotion. Nevertheless, Mendeln lived with the memories of the terrible burdens Uldyssian had taken on with the sicknesses and, later, deaths of their loved ones. The younger brother felt beholden to the

older for that reason, not to mention many other, lesser ones.

“What about *that*?” Achilios grumbled, gesturing at the stone with his bow. “Do we just leave it like that?”

After a moment’s consideration, Mendeln replied, “We shall cover it over. Help me with it.”

The two of them gathered loose branches and bits of leafy shrubbery. Yet, although they quickly had the artifact hidden from sight, Mendeln felt as if it still stood naked to the world. He considered covering it further, then decided to make do with what they had already done. The first opportunity he had to return to it, he would.

As Mendeln focused on the path back, he belatedly noticed that the weather had taken an odd and very sudden turn. The day had been fairly clear and bright before, but now clouds began to gather in earnest to the west, as if in preparation for a major storm. The wind had also begun to pick up.

“That’s odd,” murmured Achilios, also evidently seeing the change for the first time.

“It is, yes.” Uldyssian’s brother did not understand the wind and weather in terms of hunting, as his companion did, but rather in measurements of currents and such. Mendeln constantly saw the aspects of farm life in such terms, and while Uldyssian—who knew weather only in how it affected his crops and his animals—constantly shook his head at his brother’s ways, he could not deny that once in a while Mendeln had come up with some idea that had helped ease their tasks a bit.

The clouds rapidly thickened. Mendeln said nothing more to Achilios about the strange weather, but at one point when the archer moved a step ahead, Uldyssian’s brother glanced back in the direction of the stone.

Glanced back...and wondered.

Uldyssian, too, noticed the peculiar shift in the weather, but chalked it up to one of those quirks of nature to which a farmer had to grow accustomed. He hoped that Mendeln would return soon from wherever Achilios had dragged him. Even then, it was likely that the two brothers would have to make part of the journey home in the rain. The sudden accumulation above hinted at a particularly powerful storm brewing, but Uldyssian hoped that perhaps it would hold for a time before unleashing its full force. If he and Mendeln could at least make it past the low fork, where the trail often flooded, then they would be all right the rest of the way.

Hands clutching the reins, he sat on the wagon eyeing the direction in which Serenthia had indicated the pair had gone. Both Mendeln and Achilios surely had sense enough to see what he did and react properly...at least, Achilios did.

As he waited, his mind drifted back to a face framed in gold. Even though Uldyssian had seen her only two brief times, he knew that he would not soon forget the vision of her. It had been due to not merely her beauty—memorable enough by itself—but the manner in which she had talked and acted. There had been that about the noblewoman that had instinctively made Uldyssian want to protect her as he had no other, not even his brother at the time of their family's deaths.

Lylia. The farmer ran the name over and over in his thoughts, savoring the almost musical beauty of it.

The sky rumbled, finally jarring him back to the present. Recalling Mendeln, Uldyssian stood up in the hope of getting a better view. Surely the two had to be almost back in Seram by now.

A flash of green caught his attention, but not the green that made up part of the hunter's woodland garments. Rather, it was an emerald green that instantly caused Uldyssian to jolt to attention, his brother and friend utterly forgotten.

Lylia slowly strode into the woods beyond, leaving the safety of the village. From her passive expression, it seemed very likely that she did not even notice the potential threat from the sky. In this region, the storms could suddenly grow so vicious as to uproot trees without warning.

Leaping down, Uldyssian secured the wagon, then headed after her. Although the farmer mostly ran after Lylia out of concern, excitement also filled him. He had no illusions about his chances with one of her blood, but at the same time his heart pounded at the thought of at least speaking with the noblewoman again.

Uldyssian caught sight of her again just as the wind doubled. Despite the worsening conditions, Lylia still appeared not to notice. Her lips were pursed and her gaze was fixed groundward.

Despite the swift pace Uldyssian kept, he did not manage to catch up to her until well into the woods. The towering farmer started to reach out a meaty hand, then thought better of it. He did not want to take any chance of frightening her more than he had to. Whatever weighed on her thoughts clearly weighed heavily.

Seeing no other option, Uldyssian cleared his throat.

Lylia straightened sharply, then looked behind her. "Oh! 'Tis you!"

"Forgive me, my lady—"

A shy smile immediately came to her lips. "I told you. To you, I am Lylia. What I once was, I can never be again." As his expression turned

to one of confusion, she added, “But what do I call you, sir farmer?”

He had not realized that he had never introduced himself. “I am Uldyssian, son of Diomedes.” A rattle of thunder reminded him of their current circumstances. “My—Lydia, you shouldn’t be out here. There’s what seems to be a fierce storm brewing! Best if you seek shelter, likely in the tavern. It’s one of the strongest of buildings in Seram.”

“A storm?” She glanced skyward and for the first time appeared to register the change. The clouds had thickened to the point that day had almost turned to night.

Daring her disdain, he finally took hold of Lydia by the wrist. “There doesn’t look to be much time!”

But Lydia instead turned her gaze in another direction...and a breath later let out a small gasp.

Uldyssian followed her eyes, but saw nothing. Nonetheless, the noblewoman stood frozen, as if whatever had caught her attention shocked her senseless.

“Lydia...Lydia, what is it?”

“I thought I saw...I thought...but, no...”

Even when he stood next to her, the farmer could see no cause for her alarm. “Where is it? What did you see?”

“There!” She pointed at a particularly dense area of the woods. “I... think...”

He was tempted to simply take her back to Seram and return after the storm, but the intensity of her reaction made him worry about what lay out there. Mendeln suddenly came to mind. Mendeln, who was still missing.

“Stay here.” Uldyssian started forward, at the same time drawing his knife.

The brush thickened and at times the wild grass rose as high as his waist. How Lydia had seen *anything* was beyond him, but he trusted that this was no wild-goose chase.

Then, as he neared the area in question, Uldyssian’s hackles rose. A sense of dread rushed over him, nearly causing the stalwart farmer to backtrack.

A faint but sickly scent wafted under his nose. It brought back memories of the plague, of his family...

Uldyssian did not want to take another step closer and yet, he did.

The sight before him made the farmer fall to one knee. It was all he could do to keep his last meal in his stomach. His knife slipped from his hand, utterly forgotten in the face of the horrific revelation before him.

What had once been a man—at least, from the height, Uldyssian

decided it must be so—lay strewn across the patch of ground at the base of the first trees. His entire torso had been expertly sliced open, much the way the farmer would have done to a cow after slaughter. Blood soaked everything in the immediate vicinity and had turned the dirt in some places to crimson mud. Part of the victim's own stomach had poured out of the cut and flies already clustered over the tremendous, stench-ridden bounty.

As if cutting open the body had not been terrible enough, the throat had been slit open sideways, the gap large enough to admit a fist. The face was covered with blood from the wounds, and leaves and other refuse decorated it like some bizarre festival display. After a long study, Uldyssian finally determined that he did not know the man, who was roughly his age and with black hair now caked with gore.

It was what remained of the shredded garments that finally identified the unfortunate figure for the son of Diomedes. The robes's coloring alone was sufficient in itself, but the symbol of the missionary's order left no doubt whatsoever.

Uldyssian had found Brother Caligio, the missing acolyte from the Triune.

A gasp from behind startled him. He spun about to see Lylia, eyes wide, taking in the awful sight.

She suddenly went pale. Her eyes fluttered upward, showing only whites...and then she began to fall.

Pushing himself to his feet, Uldyssian managed to catch her just before she could strike the ground. He held her prone body for a moment, at a loss what to do. Someone had to be told about the murder, likely Captain Tiberius, chief of the Seram Guard. Dorius, the village's leader, would also need to know.

In his arms, the noblewoman moaned. Uldyssian decided that, first, he had to take care of Lylia.

Fortunately, it took little effort for the towering farmer to carry her. Uldyssian moved at as swift a pace as he could without risking his precious burden. He had to watch his footing at all times, fearful that one false step would send both of them crashing.

It was with great relief that Uldyssian reached the edge of the village. The sky continued to thunder loudly, but the storm so far held back.

"Uldyssian!"

He stumbled at the sound of his name, nearly tossing Lylia away in the process. The farmer managed to steady himself, then looked to the source of the call.

A great fear lifted off his chest as Mendeln and Achilios came rushing up to him. They had clearly just arrived themselves. Mendeln

was slightly out of breath and Achilios had a pale expression that the elder son of Diomedes suspected mirrored his own...even though Achilios could not yet know about the grisly discovery.

As the pair came up to him, he immediately growled, "There's a body out in the woods behind me! Near where the forest first thickens!"

Eyeing the farmer's burden, the hunter muttered, "An accident?"

"No..."

Achilios grimly nodded. He pulled a bolt from his quiver, notched the bow, and without hesitation went off in the direction Uldyssian had indicated.

"What of her?" Mendeln asked. "Who is she? Is she harmed in any way?"

"She fainted." Uldyssian felt unusually anxious. He kept hoping that Lylia would awaken, but she remained a limp bundle in his arms. "She saw the body, too."

"Should we take her to Jorilia?" Jorilia was Seram's healer woman, an elderly figure some believed half-witch, but who was respected by all for her skills. It was she who had given the brothers the herbal mixtures that had at least eased some of their stricken family's agony. To both Uldyssian and Mendeln, she had done far more than all the prayers combined.

Uldyssian shook his head. "She just needs to rest. She must have a room at the Boar's Head." He hesitated. "But we can't bring her through the front door like this..."

"There is a back way near the steps leading to the upper rooms," Mendeln said with far more calm than the situation would have warranted for most other people. "You could take her through there while I go and speak quietly with Tibion in order to find which one is hers."

His brother's suggestion made perfect sense. Uldyssian exhaled gratefully. "We'll do that."

Mendeln studied him for a moment, perhaps reading deeper into his brother than Uldyssian preferred. As far as the younger son of Diomedes was concerned, Lylia was a perfect stranger, yet clearly she was not so with Uldyssian.

Rather than explain all now, Uldyssian hurried on. A moment later, Mendeln caught up. They spoke no more, intent on their efforts.

Owing to the inclement shift in the weather, they were not hindered by any startled passersby. That both pleased and frustrated Uldyssian, who wanted Lylia safely in her room but also wanted to let someone of authority know about the acolyte's heinous slaughter. He finally satisfied himself with the knowledge that Achilios would

certainly contact the Guard or the headman.

Mendeln left him as the pair neared the Boar's Head. Slipping around the back, Uldyssian found the other doorway. With some manipulation, he managed to get the noblewoman inside without losing his grip on her once.

Inside, he wasted no time heading up the wooden staircase. Fortunately, most eyes in the tavern section had turned to his brother, who had apparently timed his entrance to coincide with Uldyssian's. As Uldyssian raced up, he heard Mendeln greet a couple of those seated with a slightly louder than average voice.

At the top, he waited. After what seemed an eternity, his younger brother finally joined him.

"She had no quarters," Mendeln explained. "So I had to arrange for some, with our credit. Was that all right?"

Uldyssian nodded. He looked at the five doors. "Which?"

"This one," his sibling replied, pointing to a lone door farther from the rest. "More private."

With a look of grim approval, Uldyssian had Mendeln open the way for him. This being Seram, the room was fairly austere. Other than a framed bed with down comforter and a table and chair near the single window, there was no furniture. There were hooks on the wall for cloaks and such and a space for a traveler's bag or trunk.

Mendeln noted the last before Uldyssian could say anything. "She must have belongings with the caravan. Shall I go to Serenthia and take care of it?"

While he hated involving Cyrus's daughter in this situation, Uldyssian could see no other choice. "Go ahead."

Mendeln paused at the door. Meeting his brother's gaze, he asked, "How do you know this woman?"

"We met by chance," was all Uldyssian would return. After a moment, Mendeln finally nodded and left the room.

Gently placing the noblewoman on the bed, the farmer paused to look at her. Again, he was struck by the perfection of her face and wondered what could have sent her wandering alone in the world. Certainly, Lylia could have found a good marriage with many a wealthy noble. Was she related by blood, perhaps, to one of the losing mage clans? That might explain the matter...

As he pondered this, her eyes abruptly opened. Gasping, Lylia bolted into a sitting position.

"What...what happened?"

"Do you remember the woods?"

Her hand went to her mouth as she stifled another gasp. "It was all...all true, then? What I...saw?"

Uldyssian nodded.

“And you...you brought me here...where *is* here?”

“The Boar’s Head. It’s the only inn in Seram, miss—Lydia. We thought you likely had a room here.”

“But I do not—”

He shrugged. “My brother took care of that; then we brought you up here. After that, Mendeln went to retrieve your things from the caravan.”

She stared long and hard into his eyes. “Mendeln and your brother...they are the same person, I gather?”

“Yes.”

The noblewoman nodded to herself, then asked, “And the...the body?”

“A friend is looking into it. He can be trusted to deal with the matter properly. Achilios will alert the Guard, then our headman.”

Lydia drew her knees up to her chin, then hugged her legs. That she badly wrinkled her elegant gown, she did not seem to care. “Was the...was the man we found also a friend of yours?”

“Him?” Uldyssian shook his head. “A damned missionary...from the Temple of the Triune. His companions were looking for him earlier.” He considered. “They came with the caravan. Did you—”

“I saw them, yes, but never spoke. I have little trust in their teachings...or that of the Cathedral, for that matter.”

This admission, so near to his own thoughts concerning the two sects, inexplicably lightened Uldyssian’s heart. Then the farmer quickly berated himself. However much his calling repelled Uldyssian, the man had not deserved such a monstrous end.

Thinking of that, Uldyssian knew that he had to go and see to the situation. As the one to initially come across the dead missionary, it behooved him to tell the village officials what he knew.

His brow arched as he considered the noblewoman. He would avoid speaking of Lydia as much as possible. She had already been through too much.

“I want you to stay here,” he commanded, inwardly stunned that he should talk to a lady of high caste so. “Stay here and rest. I have to see those who’ll deal with the body. You needn’t come.”

“But I should be there...should I not?”

“Only if necessary. You merely saw what I saw, after all. And you didn’t know him, either.”

She said nothing more, but Uldyssian had the clear impression that Lydia knew that he risked his reputation by protecting her so. The noblewoman leaned back on the bed. “Very well. If that is what you wish. I will wait until I hear from you.”

“Good.” He started for the door, already formulating his explanation.

“Uldyssian?”

He looked at her.

“Thank you.”

Face flushing, the farmer exited. Despite his size, he moved silently down the steps. At the bottom, he glanced into the tavern. Everyone he saw acted as if nothing was wrong, which meant that news of the corpse had not yet filtered inside. Achilios could be thanked for that discretion. Seram would be in shock soon enough, the last murder having taken place more than four years ago and that due to a drunken altercation between old Aronius and his stepson, Gemmel, over farming rights, with the latter coming out the loser. Once sober, Aronius had pleaded his guilt and had been driven off by wagon to the great city to dutifully pay for his deeds.

But the butchery Uldyssian had witnessed had not been due to strong drink. This looked more the work of some madman or beast. Surely an outsider, some brigand passing through the region.

Growing more certain of this with each breath, Uldyssian vowed to bring it up the moment that he spoke with the headman and the Guard commander. The men of Seram would be more than willing to volunteer to search the area for the bastard. This time, the crime would be handled locally; a good strong rope would end the matter as it should. It was all such a fiend deserved.

He opened the back door and slipped out—

“There! That is the man of whom I speak!”

Uldyssian retreated into the doorway, startled. Before him stood Tiberius—a beefy man against whom the farmer had wrestled during festival events and *lost* to more than he had won—and gray-haired, vulpine Dorius, who was staring at Uldyssian as if never having seen him before. Behind them stood more than a dozen other men, most of them from the Guard, but also Achilios...and the two other acolytes of the Temple. The older male was, in fact, the one who had spoken and now stood pointing accusingly at the perplexed farmer.

Recovering, he looked to the hunter. “Did you tell them everything?”

Before Achilios could answer, Dorius interjected, “You’re not to speak to him, hunter. Not yet. Not until all the facts be known.”

“The facts *are* known!” declared the Triune’s emissary. His female companion nodded over and over as he spoke. At the moment, there seemed nothing pious or peaceful about the pointing figure. “*You* are the one responsible! Your own words brand you! Confess for the sake of your soul!”

Uldyssian fought to keep his distaste for the acolyte from overcoming his reason. If he understood the man correctly, then the farmer had just been accused of the very murder he had been trying to warn them about.

“Me? You think *I* did it? By the stars, I should take you and—”

“Uldyssian...” murmured Achilios anxiously.

The son of Diomedes regained control. To the archer, he said, “Achilios! I told you where to find the body! You saw my expression and—” He halted, not wishing to draw in Lylia. “—and you know me! Dorius! You were friends with my father! I swear by his grave that I’m not the fiend who so foully slew this jabbering fool’s comrade!”

He would have gone on, but the headman waved him silent. His expression stern, Dorius replied, “Tis not *him* we speak about at the moment, Uldyssian. Nay, we speak of the other...though it might very well be that we’ll need to be returning to that before long, as I don’t believe in no coincidence.”

““Other”? What other?”

Captain Tiberius snapped his fingers. Instantly, half a dozen men—half a dozen men whom Uldyssian had known from childhood on—moved to surround the farmer.

Achilios tried to intercede. “Dorius, is this necessary? This is *Uldyssian*.”

“Your word’s respected, young Achilios, but this is duty.” The headman nodded to the man in the circle. “I’m certain that it’ll all be working out, Uldyssian. Just let us do what the situation demands!”

“But for *what*?”

“For possibly murdering a man,” grunted Captain Tiberius, one hand on the sword at his side. Uldyssian had seen the Guard commander carry the weapon only a few times in all the years he had known him, with all but one of those being for the aforementioned festivals and other special events.

The lone exception had involved the murder of Gemmel.

Shaking his head, the farmer roared, “But I told you that I *didn’t* slay his companion!”

“Tis not him we’re talking about,” Dorius declared. “But it’s one of a similar calling, which makes this worse, young Uldyssian. It’s the one hailing from the Cathedral of Light who’s been found slain...”

“The one...” Uldyssian trailed off, his thoughts in turmoil. *But I just spoke to the man a short time ago! Less than an hour, if even half that!*

Spoke to the man...and *threatened* him in the process before several witnesses...

“Aye, you recall him, I see. Yes, young Uldyssian, the honored emissary of the Cathedral was found with his throat cut open...and ’tis

your *knife* jutting out of the gap made!”

THREE

Uldyssian had never paid much mind to the interior of the Guard building. It was one of those places the farmer passed constantly, but, as he had never been arrested for drunkenness or fighting, there had been no reason for him to ever enter it.

But now he sat in one of the two barred rooms in the back quarter. To reach them, visitors—and prisoners—had to enter an inner wooden door and walk down a short corridor. Uldyssian, sitting in the first cell, felt entirely cut off from the world. A worn wooden bench acted as chair, table, and bed. Uldyssian had lived here for four days now, two days in which his farm had been left all but unattended. The crops needed weeding and irrigating and the animals had to be cared for. Mendeln had promised to see to everything, but Uldyssian feared that his brother was not up to such a task on his own, especially while also worrying about his elder sibling. Moreover, while the earlier storm had, ironically, blown itself out fairly quickly and with little violence, the clouds had remained over Seram since then and Uldyssian feared that another tempest—and perhaps a greater one—might follow. The farm had been fortunate the first time, but a second assault might throw it into a turmoil from which it could not survive.

He knew that the farm should have been the least of his worries. The situation involving the murders had grown even worse than Uldyssian had imagined it could. With both victims members of the leading sects, Dorius had felt compelled to send word to Tulisam, where the Cathedral and the Temple had a permanent presence. He had requested that representatives from one or both come to help oversee the matter. The two surviving missionaries had ridden along with those messages, supposedly in order to give testimony to their particular masters. In addition, while the headman continued to promise Uldyssian that all would turn out well in the end, he had insisted that Captain Tiberius keep the son of Diomedes locked up for that time, lest there be some question as to Seram's notions of justice for the victims.

Uldyssian remained dumbstruck by what had happened to the second missionary. According to a more detailed story told him later by the erstwhile Guard commander, the Cathedral's emissary had been found on his back, his face contorted in what Tiberius freely called "absolute" fear and the farmer's knife—upon whose wooden handle

Uldyssian had made his mark—thrust deep into the rib cage.

Compared with the corpse that *he* had discovered, the second body had barely been touched. That, however, made the crime no less terrible. In fact, no one could recall such a multiple tragedy since the plague had swept through...the same plague that had taken Uldyssian's family.

Serenthia came to visit him each day, giving him hopeful word from many others unable to do the same. The consensus by those who knew him was that Uldyssian was utterly innocent. Achilles had already blackened the eye of one man who had suggested otherwise.

As Uldyssian sat with his head in his hands, he thought not of himself, but of Lylia. She had not come to him once since his incarceration, not that he had expected her. Indeed, the farmer hoped that she would continue to stay away, lest she somehow be drawn into the madness. Soon, he kept promising himself, soon he would be released and then the two of them could meet again.

If she even remained in Seram...

Thought of never seeing the noblewoman again fueled Uldyssian's already tremendous anxiety. His entire life seemed to have turned into some nightmare. He had not even felt this way when his family had died, but now those memories, too, added their terrible weight to his already overburdened shoulders.

Not for the first time, the walls of his tiny chamber seemed to close in on him. Uldyssian had been born and raised on the farm. He had never known anything else but freedom. When his mother had perished, Uldyssian had run out into the fields and shouted out his agony, aware that only his brother was there to hear him.

I've got to get out...I've got to get out... The words ran through his mind over and over, swelling in significance with each repetition. Uldyssian stared bleary-eyed at the door to his cell, unable to accept the bars and the lock. Animals were kept locked up in pens, not *him*. Not—

There was a slight groan and a click.

The cell door swung back with a metallic squeal.

Uldyssian threw himself against the back wall as it happened. He watched in utter amazement as the door swung completely around, clanging against another part of the barred front.

The entrance to the cell stood wide open before Uldyssian, but the farmer made no move whatsoever toward it. He had no idea what had just happened, and despite his deep desire to be out of this place, the doorway enticed him not in the least.

At that moment, the wooden door down the hall also opened. Tiberius and two of his men marched down the halls toward the cells.

When he saw Uldyssian's cell, the captain came to a jarring halt. "What the—"

Recovering, he snapped his fingers and the two guards leapt into the cell to cover the prisoner. As they kept Uldyssian at bay, Tiberius inspected the door.

"No scratches, no damage at all." He glared at the farmer. "Search him for anything that could be used for a key."

The guards did so. However, they came up empty-handed, just as Uldyssian knew that they would.

Tiberius stepped up to his prisoner. Waving the guards back, he leaned close and whispered, "I don't like having you here any more than you like being here, Uldyssian. You may not believe this, old friend, but I don't think you any more guilty than I am for what happened to those two."

"Then, why—"

"This may only be Seram, but I'll run the Guard here like it's Kehjan itself! My father served in the Guard there for three years and then ran things here! I'll not dishonor his memory by failing in my duty. We do this as decreed, however disdainful it may seem."

While Uldyssian could respect Tiberius's position, it did nothing to assuage him. "I just want this over with! I've done nothing!"

"And that'll be proven. You'll see." The captain gestured at the door. "But that'll only make matters worse..."

"I didn't do that! It just opened on its own."

Tiberius looked disappointed. "I expected better of you, Uldyssian. There's nothing wrong with that door. I checked."

"I swear by my father!"

With a deepening frown, the captain grunted, then turned away. He stepped out of the cell, the guards following. One of the men shut the door, then tested it to make certain it would stay shut.

"It's locked tight," the man declared to his commander. Nevertheless, Tiberius checked it himself by seizing the door with both hands and throwing his full weight back. The entire cell wall rattled, but held firmly in place.

Captain Tiberius let go. Despite the display, he leaned against the bars and said to the farmer, "Don't do it again. I might have to give an order I wouldn't like to see fulfilled. Just be patient, Uldyssian."

The anxious—and thoroughly baffled—prisoner could only nod. Satisfied, the captain led his men off.

One of the guards came back a short time later with a bowl of stew. He tested the door yet again, then, with a nod, slid the farmer's meal through.

As he ate, Uldyssian tried to ponder once more what was taking the

matter so long. He was clearly innocent. He also wondered how the true murderer could have moved so swiftly. It had only been a short time between the moment of the first grisly discovery and when the Cathedral's missionary had been slain. The fiend would have had to almost fly from one to the other the moment that he had the farmer's knife. Uldyssian ruled out Achilios as the possible madman; the hunter was not only too good of a man, he was a true friend...and he had also been with Mendeln during the entire incident.

Then...who?

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, but footsteps much lighter, more delicate, than the tramping boots of Tiberius and his men. Uldyssian looked up...and beheld Lylia nearing.

"I had to see you," she murmured, her smile hesitant. Clearly she feared that he would be angry about her disobedience.

But at this point, Uldyssian could not reprimand her. She had waited a long time. He was even grateful that the noblewoman had not simply fled Seram, abandoning him to his fate.

Still, he started his greeting by saying, "You shouldn't be here."

"I couldn't stay in my room any longer. This is wrong! It's happening all over again!"

"What do you mean?"

She pressed herself against the bar. Uldyssian put down the bowl and went to her. He had a great urge to crush her in his arms in order to comfort her. He felt as if *she* were the one in danger, not him.

"You were kind to a stranger," she whispered, her hand reaching through the bars to touch his. "A stranger with nowhere to go. Do you know why?" Lylia looked down. "Because of the game between the Cathedral and the Temple!"

"The *what*?"

Her eyes shifted up to his, their beauty seizing his gaze. He wanted to drown himself in those eyes. "The *game*. This is all a game to them, with the winner being the one who survives. They will let nothing and no one stand in their way and one thing that both despise is a heretic."

Uldyssian did not like where the conversation seemed to be heading. "What...what do you mean, Lylia?"

She glanced back toward the door leading to the cells, then, maintaining her whisper, replied, "This has happened before. With my family. We had influence and wealth, both of which the two sought for their own. But we rejected them publicly...and then our world turned upside down! There was violence, the burning of a minor temple, with many of the faithful injured terribly. The fire spread to other buildings nearby. Afterward, it was somehow found that the

tragedy had been of human making and that *my* family had some tie to it.”

He gaped.

“All lies!” she quickly added, clearly taking his shock for belief in her family’s guilt. However, Uldyssian by no stretch of the imagination suspected Lylia of such horror...and, by extension, her loved ones, either.

“I believe you,” he quickly told her. “I believe you. Go on.”

“While we had rejected them, there were others, far more powerful, who had embraced one or the other sect. Accused without true proof, my family was nevertheless stripped of *everything*. My father and mother were dragged off, never to be seen again! My brother was sent to the dungeons and my sister forced to wed one of the Cathedral’s most prominent supporters! A similar fate was intended for me, but I took what money I could get and fled from the city...”

“And that’s how you ended up in Seram?”

“Not at first...and certainly not in the company of those serving the very evil I sought to escape!” She bit her lip. “I’ve told you so much... now I suddenly fear that you might think that *I* might be responsible for what happened to the two!”

Uldyssian immediately shook his head. “That’s hardly possible! This was done by someone much stronger and certainly more monstrous than you could *ever* be! It makes more sense that they would suspect *me*!” But something dark occurred to him. “Tell no one else this, though! They might think that I did it on your behest!”

She put a hand to her mouth at this realization. “I did not think—”

“Never mind. It’d be best if you leave and don’t come back. Things will be all right—”

“But they won’t be! I heard at the inn! There are Inquisitors from the Cathedral of Light arriving tomorrow and someone hinted of Peace Warders from the Temple soon after! It’s happening just the same as with me!”

Her announcement jolted him. He had been told nothing of Inquisitors or Peace Warders coming to Seram. The arms of justice for each of the two sects, the two groups acted as judges and guards. True, this involved the slaughter of their own, but where Uldyssian was concerned, there was hardly a need for either element.

The farmer stood there for a moment, trying to think. It was the noblewoman, however, who spoke first.

“We made the mistake of letting them act before we did, Uldyssian! You cannot let that happen! They will twist everything around, so that even if you are innocent, your guilt will be obvious to all! You have to stand up to them! Speak out defiantly, as you have always done! Your

friends will rally to you, I know it! Neither the Cathedral nor the Temple will be able to use your hatred of them against you, then!”

“I—” There were points he would have argued, but they faded to nothing under the arresting beauty of those eyes. He finally decided that Lylia was right; Uldyssian would make use of the lesson of her family to save himself...and her, too.

“You must do it...” she breathed. “Please...for our sake...”

Without warning, the noblewoman pulled his face close to the bars, then kissed him. As the farmer stood there, completely at a loss, Lylia, her face scarlet, fled the area.

Uldyssian watched her vanish. Blinking, he suddenly recalled the door. As the guard had done, the farmer tested it. The door held, as it should have.

To Uldyssian, that settled everything. Lylia was absolutely right. He needed to stand up for himself. The Inquisitors—and the Peace Warders, assuming that they, too, were on their way—would be looking for guilt, not innocence.

He would do his best to leave them disappointed.

Serenthia pulled back out of sight of the Guard headquarters as Lylia passed. She had no real reason for doing so, save for what she realized was likely jealousy in what to her had been a ridiculously short time, Uldyssian had clearly fallen for the blond woman. She had been able to do with her mere appearance what Serenthia had for years often hoped of doing. Even as a child, she had been fascinated by Uldyssian’s perseverance, his inner strength, especially the way in which he had managed the terrible deaths in his family.

Lylia vanished in the direction of the Boar’s Head. Cyrus’s daughter waited a few moments more, then stepped from behind the corner of the smithy—

At which point she collided with Achilios.

“Serry!” he managed. “Where did you—”

“I’m so sorry!” Serenthia felt her face flush. While she had spent much of her life pursuing Uldyssian, Achilios had done the same in regards to her. It was not unflattering, either, for he was handsome and well respected and treated her the way a woman wanted to be treated. Common sense said that the trader’s daughter should have accepted his courting with pleasure, but although Serenthia welcomed the hunter’s company, she could just not yet give up on her dream of gaining Uldyssian’s love.

Of course, that had been before the arrival of Lylia.

“I was looking for Mendeln,” Achilios finally managed, his own

countenance somewhat reddened. "But this is a happy accident!"

His cheerfulness did not suit her at the moment, not with Uldyssian locked up for foul deeds he could never in his life have committed. Her annoyance with Achilios's pleasantry must have shown, for the hunter quickly sobered.

"Forgive me! I didn't mean to be light! Were you on your way to see Uldyssian?"

"Yes...but I didn't wish to disturb him. He had another visitor."

"Oh?" The hunter's brow arched. "Ah! The fair Lylia..."

It made matters worse to Serenthia to hear Achilios also mention her in such terms. Yes, the noblewoman was beautiful, but Cyrus's daughter knew that she could attract the attention of men, too...with the exception of the one she wanted.

"She just left. I think I saw her return to the inn."

Achilios rubbed his chin. "I wonder how that went over with Uldyssian. He said that he wanted her to stay away, so that she wouldn't be drawn into the situation any more than necessary."

Serenthia had a twinge of hope that perhaps Lylia had angered Uldyssian with her visit, but immediately after suspected that such was not the case. Like most men, he had surely forgiven her once she had gazed up at him or smiled.

She recalled Achilios's question. "I haven't seen Mendeln. In fact, I haven't seen him in two days. Has he been to his brother, even?"

"Not since early three days ago, from what I know," answered the archer, much perturbed now. "And when I rode out to the farm, I found young Justivio—Marcus ul-Amphed's second son—doing the chores there. He said that Mendeln paid him for the work without explaining where he planned to go."

Serenthia could understand why Mendeln might have left the farm in the hands of someone more competent than himself, but that he had not ridden to his brother's side immediately after—and then stayed there—she could not fathom. Mendeln was very loyal to Uldyssian and when he had heard the news concerning his brother he had denied the charges with far more vehemence than any would have expected from the scholarly sibling.

"I worry about him, Serry," Achilios went on. "I doubt that he can imagine the world without Uldyssian—which is not my way of saying that Uldyssian is in any danger of being condemned for those awful crimes! No, I'm speaking only of Mendeln. He's not been the same since we—since that day."

It almost sounded to Cyrus's daughter as if Achilios had been about to speak of something other than the murders, but what could possibly compare, she could not say.

“It could be that he is with Father,” Serenthia finally suggested. “I haven’t been there since this morning.”

“Perhaps...I wonder...” The hunter’s gaze shifted away, as if something else had come to mind. He gave a minute shake of his head, then added, “You should go on with your visit with Uldyssian, Serry. I’ll find Mendeln soon, I’m certain. You just don’t—”

His mouth snapped shut and his eyes now stared wide and disturbed at something beyond his companion. Fearful that she already knew just what that might be, the black-tressed woman followed his gaze.

The party of riders had just reached the edge of the village. They rode slowly and confidently, looking as if they owned all they surveyed. There was no mistaking them for what they were, the glistening silver robes and breastplates obvious sign enough even without the golden sunburst set in the center of the latter to definitively mark them as of the Inquisitors of the Cathedral of Light. All wore round, crested helmets atop their heads save for the lead rider, whose thick gray mane was draped by a golden hood. Behind him flowed the rest of the shimmering cloak, the bottom hem nearly blinding the horse behind his own. The cleric was clean-shaven, as were all those who served directly under the Prophet. This was not mere personal choice, but a purposeful decision. After all, the Prophet himself wore no beard...and, if rumor be true, looked young enough to be this cleric’s grandson despite supposedly being much older.

The party numbered a dozen at least, a number that startled both onlookers. Dorius had given every indication that he had expected two at most and none of them of such authority as he who now dismounted.

The Master Inquisitor—Serenthia knew that the distinguished figure could have no lesser role—surveyed Seram as if uncertain that this backwater could be his destination. He suddenly noted the pair and immediately signaled them to approach. Well aware that this man held much sway over Uldyssian’s fate, Serenthia obeyed instantly, with the archer but a step behind.

“I am Brother Mikelius!” boomed the Master Inquisitor, as if seeking to announce it to every inhabitant within a mile. “Is this then Seram, the scene of such terrible doings?”

“This is Seram, yes, Holiness,” Serenthia responded meekly, curtsying at the same time. Unlike Uldyssian or Achilios, she had some belief in the teachings of both the Cathedral and the Triune, but had yet to decide which was her preference. The Triune taught of the power of the individual, while the Cathedral preached that it was Humanity’s combined efforts that would best see it achieve its

ultimate destiny.

“Who is in charge? We were supposed to be met.”

“Our headman is Dorius, who—”

Brother Mikelius cut her off. “Never mind! You!” He pointed at Achilios. “You know where the body of our unfortunate brother lies?”

Following Serenthia’s example, the hunter bowed. “I believe I know where he was buried.” When the Master Inquisitor frowned, Achilios added, “It’s been several days, Holiness. Both bodies had to be put to rest or else they...” He spread his hands. “Well, you understand.”

“Of course, my son, of course. Lead us to the grave, then.”

“With due respect, Holiness, it would be proper if Master Dorius or Captain Tiberius led you to—”

“We are here,” declared Brother Mikelius firmly. “They are not. We shall speak with them at first possible opportunity...and the barbarous heretic, too.”

Serenthia stifled a sound at this description of Uldyssian. She wondered what Dorius’s messenger had relayed to the Master Inquisitor. Brother Mikelius sounded certain that the true murderer had already been caught.

“Your Holiness—” she began.

But Brother Mikelius had already started past her, four of his guards accompanying him. The rest of his party began fanning out as if preparing to attack Seram and, in truth, they looked capable of winning such a battle, even outnumbered as they were.

“It’s this way,” Achilios said with a tone of surrender.

The Master Inquisitor paid Serenthia no further mind, but at the same time he also did not keep her from following. Cyrus’s daughter wanted to run to Uldyssian and warn him of the Cathedral’s arrival, but she also did not want to miss whatever Brother Mikelius might say or do, even if Achilios was also there to witness it.

Several villagers, perhaps alerted by the Master Inquisitor’s loud voice, stepped out to see what was going on. Brother Mikelius acknowledged them with an occasional wave and pious nod as he strode commandingly toward the burial sites.

The sky rumbled, but otherwise the late day seemed oddly calm. There was not even the least wind, something unusual. As Serenthia entered the village cemetery behind the others, she felt as if the spirits of the dead all stood hushed around them.

A dank, stone wall waist high surrounded the grounds, here and there broken areas speaking of some neglect. It was not difficult to find where the victims had been buried, for not only were they the only fresh graves, but they were in a corner far from the rest. Unspoken by all the villagers was the hope that their interment was

only temporary and that the Cathedral and the Temple would claim their own and thus allow Seram to forget what had happened.

Whether or not her village would ever forget, Serenthia saw that it was indeed Brother Mikelius's intention to do something with the body of the dead acolyte. He gestured at a pair of shovels set next to the side wall and two of his armed escort immediately went to retrieve them.

"This will be far enough for you," the Master Inquisitor said to Achilios...and by way of that, to the trailing Serenthia. "This is now a matter for the Cathedral alone."

The hunter wisely bowed, then stepped back. Crudely etched into the wooden markers over each of the graves was the sign of that victim's calling. Brother Mikelius sniffed at the one signifying the Triune, then proceeded to the other. The two guards wielding shovels followed at his heels.

The Master Inquisitor went down on one knee before the marker. He ran a gloved finger over the symbol on the marker, then, muttering under his breath what Serenthia supposed was a prayer, set his hand on the top of the mound.

And almost immediately thereafter, pulled it back as if scorpions had suddenly sprouted out of the dirt in great numbers.

His countenance more grim than ever, Brother Mikelius leaned forward again, then removed from around his neck a chain that his robe had hidden. At the end of the chain was a golden medallion in the shape of a sunburst. The centerpiece was a clear gemstone that glistened even despite the cloud cover.

The cleric held the medallion over the spot in question, muttered for a moment more, then drew back, once again seemingly aghast.

Eyes blazing, Brother Mikelius turned on the two. "Who has done this? Who dares this sacrilege?"

Achilios looked at her, but she had no explanation for him. The Master Inquisitor stood straight, then pointed at the grave. "You! By your garments and that bow, I gather you to be a huntsman!"

"That I am."

"Then, you have a practiced eye. Use it! Come close and tell me what you see!"

Achilios reluctantly obeyed. Under the watchful glances of the Inquisitor guards, he stepped up to the mound.

"Look close," demanded Brother Mikelius.

As Serenthia watched, Achilios knelt just as the Master Inquisitor had. He even ran his hand gently over the same location touched by the former.

And, just as Brother Mikelius had done, the hunter could not help

momentarily jerking his hand back.

This was all the robed figure evidently needed to verify his suspicions. “Yes, you see it, also, do you not, huntsman?”

Cyrus’s daughter started forward, but a breastplated guard easily blocked her way. She watched in utter confusion as Achilios slowly rose to face the Master Inquisitor.

“Perhaps...a small animal, Holiness. Seram is, after all, surrounded by woods for—”

“This was done by no animal,” Brother Mikelius fairly hissed.

A suspicion concerning what they spoke about flashed through Serenthia’s thoughts, causing her to gasp. Brother Mikelius turned his glare her direction.

“Who was it?” he demanded, as if she knew the answer. “Who has done this?”

“Holiness,” Serenthia managed. “I don’t understand—”

Achilios sought to intercede. “She couldn’t—”

He would have none of either protest. The Master Inquisitor’s arm cut the air sharply as his imperious eyes looked down at both. “I will say this succinctly and clearly only one more time!” The guards suddenly shifted position, surrounding the pair as if they were criminals. “*Who* has desecrated the grave and body of our murdered brother?”

FOUR

Mendeln's head throbbed horribly and not for the first time since his brother had been wrongly accused of the deaths of the missionaries. Uldyssian's brother leaned against a tree in the woods deep to the north, one hand against his temple as he tried to fight down the pain.

But worse than even the pounding was that this was the *third* time now that he had blacked out for a period of time. The last he recalled, he had been on his way from the farm to see his brother.

Putting his fingers to the bridge of his nose, the younger son of Diomedes squeezed his eyes shut. He hoped that the action might relieve some of the pressure—

The image of a robed man screaming filled his head.

With a grunt, Mendeln stumbled from the tree trunk. He looked around, certain that what he had seen was taking place before him at that very moment.

But the woods were empty. Mendeln gradually realized that, while the man's mouth had been open, no sound had come from it. Mendeln recalled hearing the wild rustling of the grass and even the sound of thunder, but not the voice.

A momentary nightmare? A figment of his overwrought imagination brought on by the heinous murders? Mendeln could believe the experience nothing else...and yet, it had seemed so very *real*.

The throbbing abruptly renewed its assault. His eyes shut again as the pain overcame him.

And, once more, Mendeln was assailed by the image of the man, only this time the figure lay sprawled helpless on the ground as something loomed over him. Utter fear covered the missionary's face and he sought in vain to crawl on his back away from whoever approached.

Mendeln opened his eyes...and the scene vanished.

This time, though, Uldyssian's brother understood that what he witnessed was neither a figment nor an event of the present. He was indeed alone in the woods. No, this time, the glimpse had lasted long enough for him to recognize the garments of the screaming man, if not the man himself.

It had been the garb of an acolyte from the Triune...and the man

had been the emissary who had been so brutally slaughtered.

Mendeln shook. What did it mean? Why was he suddenly having these monstrous visions of the missionary's murder?

There had never been any talk of witchcraft in either side of the family and Mendeln himself doubted that such was the case. There had to be a more reasonable, honest explanation.

His nose itched. Mendeln realized that there was something on the bridge. He brushed at it and was rewarded with several bits of dirt in his palm. In fact, for the first time, he saw that fresh dirt covered most of his fingers.

When had *that* happened? Uldyssian's brother had not been at the farm, much less working in the fields, for some time. He had been too concerned about helping his sibling. Had he for some reason fallen while riding? That might explain both the latest blackout and the dirt.

"What is...*happening*?" Mendeln muttered. His life had always been an utterly normal—and even boring—one. Now, everything was turning on its head. These blackouts, Uldyssian's dire predicament, the ancient stone—

The *stone*.

Mendeln was no believer in coincidence. He had not started to have these blank moments until after touching the artifact. Somehow, it had affected him in a manner that he could not fathom. Oh, Mendeln had heard stories in his childhood about magic places and creatures, but those had been just *that*, stories.

Then it occurred to him to wonder why he now specifically saw the murder of the acolyte. The first notion that entered his thoughts drained the blood from his face.

No...I did not! I could not! Had the reason that he had seen the murder...and from such a frontal angle...been because *he* had somehow been responsible?

But common sense prevailed. Mendeln had been with Achilios at the time that the murders had taken place. Therefore, he was innocent of the nefarious events, just as Uldyssian surely was.

However, that still did not answer for the dirt on his hands nor his odd and lengthening periods of memory loss. The aspects of those frightened Mendeln greatly.

He thought again of his brother, a prisoner. The image of Uldyssian in the cell steeled Mendeln. He could concern himself with his own troubles when time permitted; what was most important was seeing that Uldyssian languished in the cell no longer than he had to.

Straightening, Mendeln headed back to Seram. However, as he did, he cautiously wiped his hands clean of any further residue. Perhaps the dirt meant nothing, but he did not want to take any chances. Too

many unsettling things were happening and innocent bits of soil might just hint at some new and dire deed. He could not help his brother in the least if he suddenly became suspected of another crime.

Mendeln grunted at his foolish thinking. Of *what* crime could dirt-covered hands condemn him in a farming region?

Nonetheless, Uldyssian's brother continued to wipe his palms and fingers against his clothes all the way back to Seram.

A pair of guards came for Uldyssian just as he finally managed to drift off into a troubled slumber. As he stirred, one of them rattled the cell door, then unlocked it.

"Come with us," barked the taller of the two, a plain-faced younger man whom Uldyssian knew as Dorius's nephew. "Don't give us no problems, huh?"

In response, the farmer quietly placed his hands behind his back and turned so that the guards could secure his wrists. When they had done so, they led him out.

Tiberius met them at the door leading outside. The captain made no attempt to hide his disgruntlement, although he did not bother to explain to Uldyssian the reason for his mood. The farmer could only assume that it boded ill for him.

And sure enough, as he stepped out, Uldyssian knew that matters had gone from bad to worse. He sighted the senior figure from the Cathedral of Light immediately and knew him to be more than simply a priest from the nearest town. This was a Master Inquisitor, one of the higher-ranking officials of the sect. Worse, the imperious-looking man was accompanied by several brooding guards...and a very distraught Serenthia and Achilios.

The priest strode up to him. Gazing down his nose at the farmer, he declared in a much-too-loud voice, "Uldyssian, son of Diomedes, know that I am Brother Mikelius, Master Inquisitor of this region for the great and golden Prophet! I come to ascertain the depths of your guilt and thereby judge that which is needed to redeem your soul!" He paused, then added, "And, after that, the soul of whatever miscreant desecrated the grave of our emissary, too!"

Uldyssian went white. Brother Mikelius had left no doubt that he considered the matter of a trial moot. This was not what Dorius had promised!

Before he could even open his mouth to protest, the Master Inquisitor turned from him to where the headman himself looked on with less enthusiasm than Uldyssian would have liked. "With your permission, Master Dorius, we shall make use of your quarters for

questioning of this one. I apologize for the inconvenience, naturally! The Cathedral loathes such inquiries, but they on occasion become necessary, you understand.”

“I wrote also to the Procurator General in Kehjan,” Dorius replied, trying to regain control of the situation. “I haven’t heard word, but surely he’ll be sending a proper authority—”

Brother Mikelius shook his head. “Through the Prophet, blessed be him, I carry the proper authority myself for this situation! The Procurator General will rely on my good word...”

And from the Master Inquisitor’s tone, thought Uldyssian, Dorius and the rest were to rely on it, also, whether they liked the fact or not. The farmer grimaced. Considering how Brother Mikelius had so far handled the matter, Uldyssian also doubted that he would be allowed to say very much at his own defense...unless he chose to confess.

“There is also the matter of the Triune,” Dorius added. “As one of their own was also a victim—”

“The Cathedral is here; the Temple is not. If the Triune is sloth in seeking justice for its children, it is their own failing.”

Defeated, the headman quieted. Uldyssian bit back an epithet. Brother Mikelius would not be denied.

Uldyssian tried to console himself with the fact that at least Lylia had not been drawn into things. That, the farmer could not have stood for. She had already suffered too much at both sects’ hands—

Even as he thought that, out of the corner of his eye, the telltale emerald green flashed. The farmer shook with dismay. Without meaning to, Uldyssian glanced in that direction.

Unfortunately, so did the Master Inquisitor.

Lylia stood like an animal caught in a trap. She appeared to have crept from around the back of the Boar’s Head to watch things unfold and no doubt her fear for Uldyssian had made her forget his warning.

Brother Mikelius could obviously see that she was not a local. That in itself might not have mattered, but there was that in his gaze which, when it met hers, seemed to Uldyssian to register some recognition.

The robed figure thrust a condemning finger at the noblewoman. “You there! You—”

The sky thundered, this time with such vehemence that several people, including Brother Mikelius, had to cover their ears.

The wind suddenly rose up, howling like a hungry wolf. People were thrust back by the intensity, even several of the Inquisitor guards unable to keep their positions. Only three figures remained unmoved—at least momentarily—by the fearsome gale.

Brother Mikelius, Lylia, and Uldyssian.

But the Master Inquisitor had to struggle to maintain his place. He tore his eyes from Lylia, returning them to the prisoner.

Brother Mikelius's expression was terrible to behold. He eyed the farmer with what seemed both fury and...*fear*. "By the Prophet! What are—"

A savage bolt of lightning struck the village center...*and* the Master Inquisitor.

He had no time to scream. A sickening, burning stench filled the air, spread quickly by the wind. The bolt left barely a charred mass. Uldyssian had seen the results of other strikes, but none with the intensity of this.

A second bolt hit near the first. Someone let out a cry. People began scattering in every direction. The wind continued to howl through Seram, bowling over those not holding on to something solid.

Uldyssian looked for Lylia, but she was nowhere to be found. A piece of rubbish flew up at his face and the farmer instinctively blocked it with his arm.

Only then did he notice that he was again free. The cuffs dangled loosely on one wrist and when he tugged at them, the remaining one unlatched as if never locked.

Not wasting time questioning the carelessness of his guards, Uldyssian focused on what to do next. However, Brother Mikelius's escort decided matters for him by trying to reach the freed prisoner despite the terrible wind. Three of them were already nearly in weapon range, with a fourth not far behind.

But as the foremost reached him, from out of the gale flew a thick wooden bench that Uldyssian belatedly recognized as usually sitting in front of the tavern. Almost unerringly, the bench collided with the guards, sending one sprawling and the other flying off with the makeshift missile.

Some distance behind the sprawling figures, Lylia reappeared. Holding on to the corner of the smithy with one hand, she waved for Uldyssian to come to her with the other.

Without hesitation, the stunned farmer ran toward the noblewoman. All around him, loose objects darted through the air. People scurried into buildings. Another bolt struck near the village well, tearing apart most of the surrounding stone wall.

Despite the many threats, though, Uldyssian made it to Lylia unscathed. Other than a few loose strands of golden hair, the woman, too, appeared untouched.

Concern for her overwhelmed all other thought. "Lylia! You need to find shelter—"

She seized his arm, but instead of coming with him to the smithy

entrance, Lylia tugged Uldyssian toward the woods. Her strength was surprising, and rather than risk a struggle that would leave both of them out in the open for much too long, the farmer allowed her to guide them both beyond Seram. He knew that common sense better dictated that they hide in some building, but Uldyssian still somehow convinced himself that they would surely find just as safe a location in the wild.

Indeed, the wind seemed to lessen as they rushed deeper into the woods. Refuse still swept past them, but, miraculously, nothing greater than a leaf ever touched them.

From the direction of Seram came a now-familiar crackling sound. The sky momentarily lit up as if the sun had suddenly burst through the cloud cover. Uldyssian started to look over his shoulder, but Lylia tugged him forward.

Thunder continued to rumble as if the horses of a thousand riders trampled over the land. That made the farmer think of the Inquisitors and the unfortunate Brother Mikelius. The guards would surely be after Uldyssian once the weather settled, especially after the unsettling death of their superior. While Uldyssian blamed the cleric's horrific end on the mercurial aspects of nature—even though never in his life had the farmer witnessed such a bizarre and deadly shift—he did not doubt that somehow Brother Mikelius's fate would somehow be tied to him, no matter how ridiculous that might seem.

"Keep running!" Lylia called, gazing over her shoulder at him. "Keep running!"

But in her concern for him, the noblewoman did not pay attention to her own path. Uldyssian saw the dip in the landscape just before her foot settled into it. He tried to give warning, but by then his companion was already flailing.

Her grip on Uldyssian slipped. A short-lived cry escaping her lips, Lylia tumbled forward. As she landed, she twisted around.

Stumbling, Uldyssian went to her side. Lylia lay there, her eyes open but momentarily unseeing.

"Lylia!" All fear of the unnerving weather or the Inquisitor guards vanished utterly. All that mattered to the farmer was the figure sprawled before him.

To his great relief, the noblewoman blinked. Her eyes focused again. She looked up at Uldyssian and her expression made him redden.

Trying to cover up his embarrassment, Uldyssian gave her a hand. However, as Lylia tried to stand, she let out a moan and her right ankle buckled.

"I think...I think it may be twisted," she managed. "Could you

see?"

He wanted to refuse, but knew that he could not leave her in pain. Mumbling an apology, Uldyssian pushed the long skirt away just enough to reveal the ankle.

It was black and blue and already a bit swollen. When the farmer put a gentle hand to it, Lylia gasped again.

"I need to bring you to a healer," he muttered.

"No! If you do, then you'll be captured again! I won't let them do that!"

Uldyssian frowned. What had she expected to eventually happen? He could not very well just run off. This was his home. His family had lived in Seram for generations, possibly even since its beginning. More to the point, there were those he could not leave behind, especially Mendeln. Mendeln would surely pay if his brother could not be found. There was also Achilios, known to be Uldyssian's best friend, and even Serenthia possibly risked being involved.

But at the same time, how *could* he return? The Inquisitors might eventually leave, but Tiberius would assume it his duty to arrest Uldyssian on the spot if the farmer reappeared. There was also the possibility of the Peace Warders of the Temple also still arriving to make their own judgment of the murders.

Uldyssian knelt there, the hand over the ankle forgotten as he tried to think about what to do. Lylia's fate concerned him as well and at least matters would have been a little easier if her ankle had not been injured—

"Uldyssian..."

He paid her no mind, still caught up in his concerns. Perhaps he could carry her back to the farm, then from there send her by horse to a neighboring settlement. She could get the aid she needed in one of the larger ones, then be on her way. At least then the noblewoman would be out of risk.

As for Uldyssian himself, that was another—

"Uldyssian!"

Although Lylia kept her voice low, there was no mistaking the sharp emphasis in it this time. Uldyssian glanced around, certain that they had been discovered. However, there was no sign of anyone else, especially the Inquisitors or the Guard.

"Uldyssian," she repeated. "Not that. My ankle...the pain is *gone*."

Her hopeful words only fueled his worries. If she felt no pain, it was likely that the ankle had gone numb, not a good sign. He pulled his hand aside, fearful of what he would see—

And finding instead that the ankle now looked perfectly healthy.

"But—" Uldyssian stared at the limb, certain that he saw wrong. At

the very least, the ankle had been bruised badly...and now was not.

He looked to Lylia, and the way in which she gazed at him only made Uldyssian more uncomfortable. There was awe, incredible awe, and what almost seemed...*worship*?

"You turned away..." the noblewoman murmured. "But you left your hand near my ankle. I knew...I knew you were not touching it, but I suddenly...I felt a wonderful warmth and the pain...it just went away..."

"That's not possible...there must be a reasonable explanation! An injury like that doesn't just *heal*."

"*You* did it."

At first he thought that he had not heard Lylia correctly. Then, when her words at last registered with him, Uldyssian could scarcely believe that the noblewoman would even consider something so outrageous.

"I'm no mage or witch!" he insisted, taken aback. "Your ankle was obviously not hurt after all! That's the only answer!"

She shook her head, eyes filled with something that should have gladdened his soul but only unnerved him more. *Adoration*. "No. I know the pain I felt. I know what I sensed from your hand...and I know that all the pain then disappeared as if it had never been."

Uldyssian stepped back from her. "But I didn't do it!"

The blond woman rose, then stepped toward him. Lylia moved without the least hint of injury.

"Then who? Who performed such a miracle?"

The last word sent shivers through him. He would not hear her. "We've no time for such foolishness!" He looked up. The sky seemed calmer, at least by them. Thunder yet roiled in the direction of Seram. Another bolt flashed over the village. "The storm—" Uldyssian had no other word for the peculiar weather. "—seems to be stalled. Praise be for that bit of luck!"

"I do not think it was *luck*," the noblewoman murmured.

"Then what—" The farmer cut off, his face now blanching. "No, Lylia...don't even jest—"

"But do you not *see*, Uldyssian? How timely was that wind! How righteous was that bolt that struck the arrogant Brother Mikelius just before he could condemn you for murders you did not commit—"

"And now you'd claim I've powers that *did* slay a man! Think of that, woman!" For the first time since he had met her, Uldyssian wanted to be nowhere near Lylia. It was not that he did not still find her desirable, but surely she suffered from some dementia. Perhaps the strain caused by her family's misfortune had finally taken its toll. That had to be the explanation for her behavior...

But what explained the injury that Uldyssian had seen? He did not consider himself of an imaginative nature. How, then, could his mind have conjured up such an elaborate delusion?

"No!" the farmer snapped at himself. If he followed such reasoning, he would find himself believing Lylia's outlandish suggestion. If that happened, it would be better for Uldyssian to turn himself in to the Inquisitors or the Guard before he truly *did* endanger someone else.

A soft, warm touch on his hand stirred him back to the moment. Lylia stood barely an inch from him. "I *know* it was you who healed me, Uldyssian...and I believe that it is you who summoned the wind and the lightning in our time of need."

"Lylia, please! Listen to the absurdity of what you say!"

Her flawless face filled his vision. "You want me to believe otherwise? Then prove me wrong." The noblewoman gently took him by the chin and turned his gaze so that it fell upon the direction of Seram. "The lightning still falls, bringing justice and retribution with it. The sky still roars its anger at the false accusations made against you. The wind howls at the presumption of those who would judge you when they themselves are guilty!"

"Stop it, Lylia!"

But she would not. In a firm, even defiant voice, Lylia said, "Prove me wrong, dear Uldyssian! Will with all your might for the sky to quiet—nay, even clear—and if it does not, then I will gladly admit that I was sorely deluded." Her lower lip stiffened. "Gladly..."

Uldyssian could not believe that Lylia was so deluded that she could even imagine that something like she suggested was possible. Still, if the noblewoman meant what she said, it was the quickest and easiest way to snap her back to reality.

Without another word, the farmer turned toward the turbulent heavens. Although he could have simply looked at them and pretended to be concentrating, Uldyssian somehow felt that doing so would be a betrayal to his companion even if he knew nothing would happen.

And so, the son of Diomedes squinted and thought. He wished the violent weather to vanish and the clouds to clear away. He tried to take the situation as seriously as he could, even if only for Lylia's sake.

But he was not surprised when everything remained as it was.

Certain that he had given Lylia's delusion as much chance as anyone could have, the farmer wearily turned back to her. He expected the noblewoman to be distraught, but Lylia instead looked only patient.

"I did what you asked and you saw what happened...or didn't," he said soothingly. "Now let me take you away from here, Lylia. We've

got to find a place where you—where we can rest and compose our minds...”

Unfortunately, instead of agreeing, Lylia continued to stare past him expectantly.

Uldyssian’s own patience finally came to an end. Lylia had swept his heart up the moment that he had first seen her, but he could not tolerate her delusion any longer just because of that. It was for her own good, if nothing else. “Lylia, you’ve got to pull yourself together! I did what you asked and—”

“And it came to pass...” she murmured, her face suddenly glowing with renewed adoration. Lylia gently took hold of the farmer by his arms and turned him back toward the village.

Uldyssian, about to reprimand her further, stopped. His mouth hung open.

The sun shone over Seram.

The Grand Temple of the Triune—located two days’ ride south of Kehjan—was a sprawling, triangular edifice with three high towers, each situated at one of the points. The pinnacles themselves were three-sided, with each face marked by one of the holy orders. Triangular windows lined the towers from bottom to the top.

Nearly all things concerning the structure were of a similar triple nature. To reach the entrance—which faced Kehjan—pilgrims needed to ascend three levels, with each level consisting of thirty-three steps. At the entrance itself, three massive bronze doors—also triangular—allowed the faithful into the vast welcoming hall within.

Worshippers were, naturally, greeted within by glorious effigies of the three guiding spirits. Bala the Creator loomed on the left, the androgynous figure clad in the robe of its order. In Bala’s hands were a mystical hammer and a bag, which the clerics preached contained the seeds of all life. Both nature and the architectural triumphs of Humanity were under the auspices of this spirit.

Dialon hovered to the right, the marble statue much akin to the first save that this figure held to its breast the Tablets of Order. Dialon brought purpose to Humanity, and the tablets taught how to achieve blessedness. As with Bala, Dialon wore the colors associated with those following the principles of Determination.

And in the center stood Mefis, who carried nothing but cupped its hands as if cradling the most tender of infants. Without Love, Creation and Determination could not thrive, so taught the Grand Priest—the Primus—who some said surely had to be the child of Mefis, so caring was he of his flock.

Under each of the giants, another bronze door gave way to the grand chambers of the various orders. Pilgrims and novices who found one preferable over the other would enter through these and listen to the words of that particular high priest. Peace Warders, cowled guards in leather who wore the symbols of all three orders on their chest, guided newcomers to their most likely choice. Within each chamber, several hundred could kneel in prayer at one time.

And when the Primus himself made an appearance, the walls between the three orders—walls which, although they had the facade of stone, were made of wood—were slid back into hidden niches so that *all* could bask in the Grand Priest's noble presence. Upon an elevated dais before his followers, the leader of the Triune would bring forth the word of the Three.

Today, however, the faithful came to make their own prayers, for the Primus was in council with his three most beloved, the high priests of each order. Chief among them was the tall, athletic Malic, senior of those of his rank. He had risen from an eager acolyte to his venerable role through determination, creative thinking, and devotion to his master.

He was, even the other two knew, the right hand of the Primus.

The private chamber in which they met was a small, almost empty place. The only furniture at all was the Primus's regal chair, the back of which rose high above his head and featured the triangular symbol of the sect. Twin torches set in wall niches illuminated the oval chamber, not that there was anything else to see but the chair's occupant...which was exactly the point.

The Primus gazed down at the three as he quietly spoke words for their ears alone. Of all, Malic and his counterparts knew the innermost secrets of the Triune as no one else did.

The Grand Priest's voice was pure music. His face could have been chiseled from marble, so unmarred was it. He had long, flowing hair of silver, with a short, well-trimmed beard that matched it. His features were very angular and his eyes were of a gleaming emerald. He was taller and stronger-looking than most men, but despite his commanding appearance, moved at all times with a practiced gentleness.

Until now.

Only Malic, surreptitiously lifting his gaze up, noticed the sudden and very slight tremor. Under his dark brow, the high priest of the Order of Mefis watched with concealed concern.

But the Primus evidently saw that concern despite Malic's attempts. Completely recovered now, the Triune's beloved leader made a single gesture of dismissal, to which the mustached Malic quickly alerted the

others with a tap of his own hand. The three senior priests, heads kept low, quickly retreated from the private chamber.

The Primus sat silent, his eyes apparently staring at the empty air before him. The flames of the torches suddenly flickered madly, as if a strong gust of wind briefly danced about the room.

And as the torches returned to normal, a shift came over the benevolent visage of the Primus. There was nothing holy in his aspect now; in fact, any who would have witnessed it would have found it quite the opposite...and likely feared for their very soul, then, too.

“West of the city...” he rasped in a voice now more like a serpent’s than a man’s. “West of the city...”

FIVE

As chaos overtook Seram, Achilios's first thoughts were not for himself nor even for Uldyssian. Rather, they were for Serenthia, caught in the open like so many others. The hunter dodged a spinning wagon wheel and what appeared to be the remains of a scarecrow on a cross as he rushed toward Cyrus's daughter.

From farther away came a shout. Achilios sighted the trader also running toward her. However, having stood nearer the hunter, Serenthia did not notice Cyrus nor could she hear her father.

At that moment, a massive fragment of roof suddenly tore off the Guard headquarters. It fluttered in the air like a gigantic black bird suffering its death throes...then dropped with all the accuracy of an executioner's ax toward the unsuspecting Cyrus.

Achilios shouted, but, as with the trader, could not be heard over the gale. A chill coursed through him. The hunter knew that there was only one choice left to him.

The moment that he could, Achilios leapt for Serenthia. He tackled her much the way he would have game seeking to escape one of his snares. The archer did not care; all that mattered was keeping the trader's daughter from witnessing the horrible scene to come. There was nothing he could do for Cyrus, who was too far away.

But although he managed to smother her view, Achilios could do nothing for his own. He watched in macabre fascination as the piece of roof caught Cyrus from behind. The force with which it struck the back of the man's neck ensured that there would be no hope for him. Indeed, the sharp edge severed bone and flesh with awful ease and despite the fact that he could not hear anything but the wind, the veteran hunter knew exactly what Cyrus's horrific beheading sounded like.

The rest of the broken piece collapsed atop the mangled body immediately afterward, thankfully obscuring it from sight. Serenthia chose that moment to finally struggle free. She looked up at Achilios, her expression one of surprise...and perhaps a little embarrassment, if her reddening cheeks were any sign. Achilios suddenly felt very uncomfortable and not merely because of having witnessed the fate of her father.

"Let me up, please," she called, her voice barely audible. "Have you seen Uldyssian?"

The hunter's own embarrassment grew. Unaware of Cyrus's tragic end, her first thoughts naturally went to the farmer and no one else. Certainly not Achilios.

Still, her concern for the farmer gave him a momentary reprieve from telling her what had just happened. Now was not the time for Serenthia to know. Besides, if she tried to uncover her father's body in the midst of this insane weather, it was very possible that she would merely end up joining him in death.

"I saw him run toward the smithy!" he finally shouted in response to her question. Despite his powerful lungs, Achilios had to repeat himself before the trader's daughter understood. He pulled her to her feet, careful to avoid turning her in the direction of the grisly sight. "Hold my hand tight or you may be blown back!"

To his relief, Serenthia obeyed without question. Achilios dragged her in the direction he had last seen his friend, the violent wind buffeting him as hard as any wild boar. He did not know what they would do if and when they actually located Uldyssian. The farmer was considered a prisoner, a possible murderer in the eyes of some, and Achilios's duty should have been to either convince his friend to return and face justice or, failing that, *force* him to do so. But the hunter had already seen enough of what passed for justice and the very thought of turning Uldyssian over to the Inquisitors—or even Tiberius—left Achilios cold.

More important, if he brought Uldyssian back to Seram to face the charges, the archer had no doubt that he would forever blacken himself in the eyes of Serenthia.

They raced for the edge of the village even as others ran past them in different directions. Planks tore off of buildings, adding to the dangerous debris flying about. A water bucket ripped from the village well smashed against the chest of one of Tiberius's men, sending him falling on his back. Achilios wanted to stop by the supine form to see if the other still lived, but feared that to do so would endanger Serenthia.

With much relief, he plunged Cyrus's daughter and himself into the woods. His attuned senses immediately noticed the difference between the weather there and the mad turbulence in Seram. It was almost as if he had shut a door behind him. The foliage barely shook and the howling had all but ceased.

Despite that, the hunter did not slow until the two of them were well away from the village's edge. Only then did Achilios pause, near a tremendous oak, and that more for his companion's sake than his own.

"Are you all right?" he immediately asked her.

Gasping for breath, Serenthia nodded. Her gaze shifted around the woods, seeking.

“We’ll find him, Serry,” he muttered, a little put out after having helped her escape the chaos. Then Achilios recalled Cyrus and guilt overwhelmed him.

“I wonder if—” the trader’s daughter began, halting abruptly as an unexpected hush filled the area.

The two glanced back at their home. The lightning had ceased striking and the wind there had died down, too. Most astonishing, not only were the clouds thinning, but it actually looked as if the *sun* was already trying to peek through.

“Praise be! A miracle!” uttered Serenthia. Achilios, on the other hand, felt a peculiar dread inside him, a sensation he had experienced but one time before...when he had first touched the ancient stone.

Serenthia took a step back to Seram, but the hunter pulled her deeper into the woods. “Uldyssian!” he reminded her, though the farmer was not now entirely his reason for wanting to be away from the village. “This way, remember?”

The trader’s daughter nodded, once more a look of determination across her beautiful face. Achilios wished just once that such an expression would be reserved for him.

Although he knew that he had seen Uldyssian head toward this part of the woods, Achilios found tracking his friend much more troublesome than he would have expected. Uldyssian had barely left any trace of his passing. In fact, the hunter had to guess half the time, for the farmer apparently moved through the woods with greater stealth than an animal. If not for that certain sense within Achilios, that sense that he had never mentioned to others but that always gave him the advantage when seeking a quarry’s spoor, then it would have been impossible to keep after Uldyssian.

And that sense, that *knowing* that enabled Achilios to ever follow the correct trail, also told him that someone *else* had met Uldyssian in the woods. It was not a familiar trail and from its light touch, he suspected it to be that of the noblewoman. Who else? Whatever cloaked Uldyssian did so for her, as well. Her trail was even harder to maintain focus on than the farmer’s.

For some reason, that made Achilios think of the stone again. Since he had discovered it, strange and unsettling things had kept happening, some of them undeniably unnatural in his eyes. Achilios recalled the symbols and wondered if, with time, Mendeln could translate them. Mendeln was clever. Perhaps he could even explain the terrible storm and what—

The hunter paused in his tracks, causing Serenthia to stumble into

him. He looked behind them.

Thinking that there was someone back there, Cyrus's daughter also looked. "What is it?"

"Nothing..." He tugged her forward again. Achilios could not go back for Mendeln. Uldyssian's brother would have to fend for himself. Surely, wherever he was, he was safe. The archer could not even recall seeing him when Uldyssian had been brought out before Brother Mikelius.

He can fend for himself, Achilios repeated to himself. Mendeln's very clever. Very learned. I have to worry about Serry. I have to find some way to tell her about her father...maybe when we find Uldyssian...maybe then...yes, Mendeln will be fine in the meantime...

The hunter kept on repeating the last in his head, hoping that eventually he would believe that scholarly Mendeln would indeed stay out of trouble.

Hoping, but not expecting.

Mendeln had arrived at the outskirts of the village just as it seemed that the skies had declared war on his people. In contrast to the rest of Seram's inhabitants, he had stood where he was, watching in fascination as nature acted in a manner entirely contrary to what he knew to be correct. Storms did not without warning strike so particularly. Wind did not blow with tornadic strength within village limits, only to all but die at his very feet.

Only when the phenomenon had without warning ceased did Mendeln stir himself and enter Seram. The village center was in ruins and more than one person lay still on the ground. The enormity of what had taken place began to sink in...and so did the fact that it had proven most timely for Uldyssian.

That last point was further emphasized for Mendeln as he passed the burnt carnage that he somehow knew was all that remained of the robed figure he had recognized as a high cleric of the Cathedral of Light, a Master Inquisitor from the looks of him. The fearsome bolt had left little and the stench should have sent Mendeln retreating...yet some morbid fascination drove the younger son of Diomedes toward the ghoulish corpse.

But as he came within arm's reach, a violent sensation akin to a hard fist struck him full force. Mendeln staggered back and had the unnerving feeling someone was screaming fiercely at him. He continued retreating, suddenly not wanting to be anywhere near the burnt remains.

Then, someone behind him cried, *Where is she? I can't find her...I*

can't find her...

Mendeln turned at the voice, but saw no one. Frowning, he gave up and started away in search of his brother.

Good Mendeln! Have you seen her? Have you seen my daughter?

Out of the corner of his eye, Mendeln saw a figure standing near a huge piece of torn roof littering the ground. However, as he turned, the figure seemed to vanish...or was never there in the first place.

But he thought he had recognized who it was. "Master Cyrus?" he called hesitantly. "Master Cyrus?"

There came no answer, but again Mendeln was filled with a compulsion, this time to approach the wreckage from the roof. As he neared, he sensed something beneath the wood. Reaching down, Mendeln tugged at the rubble. The wood proved even heavier than he had imagined, but by choosing to use his mass to slide it toward him, Uldyssian's brother managed to make some progress. Slowly, what had been hidden was revealed to the light—

At which point Mendeln let out a garbled cry and let the wreckage loose. He shook his head, a dismay he had not felt since the death of his parents and siblings rising up to overwhelm him.

And yet, at that moment, the familiar voice again asked, *Where is she? Where is my Serenthia?*

Only then did Mendeln realize that the voice was in his *head*. Trembling, he retreated from the roof fragment and that which it had shrouded.

A sharp point caught him in the small of his back. He started to turn, only to be seized roughly by more than one pair of powerful hands.

The stern face of an Inquisitor guard came within inches of his. "You!" barked the figure. "You are kin to the accused heretic and murder, Uldyssian ul-Diomed? Admit it! Someone identified you earlier as his brother!"

Still struggling to comprehend what had just happened before, Mendeln mutely nodded. Unfortunately, that proved to be his captors' cue to drag him through the village toward where a group of locals stood pensively eyeing four other Inquisitor guards watching over them. Mendeln estimated nearly twenty people in the group, their wide eyes and movement reminding him of a herd of sheep heading to the slaughter.

Dorius stood arguing with one of the minions of the Cathedral. Of Tiberius, there was no sign. A few of his men stood near Dorius, but they looked uncertain as to what to do, if anything.

"But you've no right to be holding these good people!" the headman insisted.

“Under the authority granted by the signed agreements between Kehjan and the Cathedral, we have what right we need or desire!” responded the lead guard haughtily. To Tiberius’s men, he added, “And in the scope of that, authority of your captain is ceded to us! You will obey all orders of the Cathedral and the first is to remove your headman to his quarters and confine him there!”

One of the locals put a tentative hand toward Dorius. “What should we—”

“I won’t budge!” insisted Dorius.

“Then, if these will disobey, I will have no choice but to have some of my own deal with you...and them, afterward.”

The headman glanced at the fearsome warriors, then at his own Guard. Shaking his head, he reluctantly turned and led the latter away.

With Dorius’s retreat and Tiberius’s absence—Mendeln now suspected that the captain was one of those struck down—the fate of Uldyssian’s brother and the rest of those gathered was squarely in the hands of the Cathedral’s Inquisitor guards. Mendeln did not exactly share his sibling’s loathing of the sect, but at the moment he could think of no worse fate for any innocent than that awaiting him now. The warriors were likely to think of this as some act of magic, a notion that even Mendeln could not entirely rule out. Certainly no reasonable explanation worked.

“Move into the circle!” growled one of those who had captured him.

Mendeln stumbled toward the others. Those nearest immediately shunned him, pressing against their fellows in their fear. Even those who had known him since childhood looked at Mendeln as if he were some sort of pariah.

Or rather, the *brother* of one.

“That’s him,” said the same guard who had shoved the younger son of Diomedes forward.

Mendeln turned to face a guard who, although he was a couple of inches shorter than the farmer, stared down the latter with ease. The broad, rough-hewn face looked more appropriate on a brigand than a representative of a holy order.

“The brother of the heretic and sorcerer, are you?” demanded the lead guard in a tone that indicated no response from Mendeln was necessary. “Where is Uldyssian ul-Diomed? Answer now and you may be spared his fate!”

“Uldyssian’s done nothing!”

“His guilt is proved, his mastery of arts foul unquestionable! His soul is lost, but yours may yet receive absolution! You have but to

give him up to us!”

The words sounded absurd to Mendeln, but the guard clearly believed everything that he said to the brother. Despite the fact that he would be condemning himself, Mendeln did not hesitate to shake his head.

“We will begin with you, then...and the rest here, all known to have fraternized with the heretic, will learn from your example!”

Just as quickly as they had tossed him in among the others, the guards then pulled Mendeln out. They dragged him to an open space. As the farmer was forced down on his knees, he saw the lead guard stride over to his horse, there to remove a long, braided whip rolled up and attached to the saddle. The guard undid the loop binding the whip, enabling the full length of the sinister weapon to flow free. He tested the whip once, the crack it made shaking Mendeln worse than the harshest thunder.

Face resolute, the lead guard headed back to Mendeln, who squeezed his eyes tight and prepared for the agony...

It was a coincidence. That was all. A coincidence.

But as Uldyssian stared toward Seram, a niggling doubt ate away at him from within. He recalled again how terrible Lyliia’s ankle had looked...and then how unmarred it had appeared but moments afterward. There was the horrific storm that had assailed the village just as Brother Mikelius had begun condemning him. What were the odds of lightning striking so perfectly?

A coincidence! Uldyssian told himself again. *No more!*

Yet, even he was not entirely convinced of that.

The farmer continued to stand there, unable to decide what to do. Then, a face came unbidden into his thoughts, a face he knew as well as his own.

Mendeln’s...and with it came a sense of urgency, of impending threat.

With a wordless cry, Uldyssian started back to Seram.

“Uldyssian!” called Lyliia. “What is it?”

“My brother! Mendeln—” was all he could say. The need to reach the village before something terrible happened to Mendeln took over. Uldyssian did not question how he knew that his brother was in danger. All that mattered was preventing Mendeln from coming to harm, even if it meant being recaptured.

Without warning, figures appeared before him. Uldyssian prepared himself for a struggle...then recognized Achilios and Serenthia.

“Uldyssian!” blurted the trader’s daughter. “Praise be that you are

all right!”

The archer, too, started to speak, but, despite being glad to see them, Uldyssian did not slow. He sensed that time was running out. Without apology, the farmer shoved past the pair, each frantic beat of his heart a scream to hurry faster.

The edge of the village came into sight. His hopes rose.

But then, from further in echoed a sharp, cracking sound that sent a shock of pain through Uldyssian’s heart.

Gritting his teeth, his breath now coming in pants, the son of Diomedes charged into Seram.

The sight that met his gaze filled him with loathing and anger. He saw many of his fellow villagers herded together like cattle, their expressions fear and confusion. Grim Inquisitor guards pointed weapons at them.

But worse, so very much worse, was what the villagers watched. Near the ruined well, the lead Inquisitor guard had Mendeln down on his knees. Another armored figure made certain that Uldyssian’s brother could not rise. Someone had torn open the back of Mendeln’s tunic and now a long, red ribbon decorated the latter’s spine.

A red ribbon made by the long, scaled whip of the lead guard.

The officer at last noticed Uldyssian, then readied the whip for another strike.

“Surrender yourself, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, or you will force me to cause your brother more suffering!”

His twisted words—insisting that it would be *Uldyssian’s* fault if Mendeln was again whipped—only made the farmer more furious. He wanted to lash out at them the way that they dared lash out at his brother—

The length of the officer’s whip curled up in the air, as if blown by some sudden gust of wind. Startled, he tugged at it, trying to bring it down, but the sinewy cord instead tangled around his neck.

He reached to pull it off, but the whip suddenly tightened. The officer’s eyes went wide and he let go of the grip in order to tear at the whip with both hands. A hacking sound escaped him.

The guard nearest Mendeln rushed to aid his commander, at the same time working to sheath his own weapon. However, his hand suddenly turned, causing the blade to rise above the sheath. Somehow, the blade bent—and buried itself upward, just beneath the breastplate.

Blood spilling over his hands, the stunned guard collapsed into the officer, whose eyes were bulging as he now clawed in desperation at the macabre noose. The wounded guard finally slumped next to Mendeln, who stumbled away in shock. A second later, the officer let

out a last gasp and joined his companion. The whip remained tight around his throat.

“Uldyssian!” called Lyliya from somewhere behind him. “Beware the others!”

He glanced to the side to see the remaining Inquisitor guards converging on his position. A part of Uldyssian wanted to flee, but his fury still dominated. He glared at the armed men, who terrorized in the name of their holy sect.

One man stumbled. His sword arm turned—

The edge of his blade expertly cut through the throat of the guard next to him. The second man let out a gurgle and fell. As he did, he dropped his own weapon, which somehow tangled the feet of another guard. That man spun around, then hit the hard ground skull-first. There was an audible snap and the Inquisitor stilled, his head now lying at an awkward angle.

But now the rest of the guards surrounded Uldyssian, who eyed them as he would have the vermin that sought to devour his crops. In his mind they were no more than that. The farmer recalled when once he had discovered a cache of grain infested with such. He had done the only thing that he could to keep the creatures from spreading. He had *burned* the cache, burned it with the vermin still inside...

Burned them...

The foremost guard cried out. He dropped his sword and stared in horror at his hand, which was blackening before the eyes of all. In but a single breath, the flesh cindered and the muscle and sinew turned to ash. Even the bone darkened and darkened until *nothing* remained.

And as he befell the fate of his hand, the guard himself suffered so. His face shriveled and his body shook, even his armor tarnishing as if tossed into a coal-fueled inferno. He screamed, but his scream was cut off as his tongue crumbled.

The eyes vanished then, melting into the sockets with horrible finality. The crumbling black figure collapsed in a heap of bones that further smoked away to dust.

His comrades had no time to gape in fear at his fate, for they perished at the same time. Their brief cries were shrill and their deaths were marked by the clatter of empty armor and lost weaponry.

Only after they were all dust did Uldyssian return to his senses... and stare at a monstrous sight he could not even at that point fully link to himself. Yet, neither could the farmer deny the fiery urge that had swept through him, the urge he had focused on the hapless men.

An unnatural silence filled Seram. Uldyssian finally tore his gaze from the macabre remains and looked at his brother, who stood but a few lengths from him. Panting, still obviously in some pain from the

harsh lash of the whip, Mendeln gaped at his older sibling.

“Uldyssian...” he finally succeeded in whispering.

But Uldyssian now looked past Mendeln to where the rest of the villagers still stood packed together even though their captors were all dead. He saw no relief in their eyes, but only what the farmer recognized as *dread*.

Dread of him...

Murmuring arose from within the group. When Uldyssian stretched forth a hand toward them, they moved as one away from his touch.

That, in turn, caused Uldyssian to retreat a step. He looked around and saw that other villagers had stepped out from hiding. Faces he had known all his life now eyed him as the former prisoners had.

“I didn’t *do* anything...” he murmured, more to himself than others. “I didn’t do *anything*...” The son of Diomedes protested louder.

But the people of Seram saw him differently, he knew. They now believed that he *had* slaughtered both missionaries. How could they not? Before their eyes, one man had been struck by lightning, another strangled by his own weapon, and the rest brought down in manners no one could ever claim ordinary.

Uldyssian spotted Tibion. He stepped toward the owner of the Boar’s Head. The old man had been as near a father to him as anyone since the death of Diomedes. Tibion could at least see sense—

The stout figure backed away, his stony expression not entirely hiding the revulsion and anxiety. He mutely shook his head.

Someone tugged on his sleeve. Mendeln. Wincing from pain, his brother whispered, “Uldyssian...come away from here. Quickly!”

“I’ve got to make them see *sense*, Mendeln! They can’t possibly believe—”

“They *believe*. I think even *I* believe. That doesn’t matter! Look around! You’re not Uldyssian to them anymore! You’re the fiend that the Cathedral’s Master Inquisitor claimed you to be! That’s all that they see!”

Brow wrinkled tight, Uldyssian glanced from one direction to another. All he saw were the same dark emotions.

Dorius reappeared...and with him Tiberius. The captain had his arm in a sling and there was a gash on his right cheek. Behind the pair came the men who had been ordered to lock up the headman in his own quarters.

Captain Tiberius was the one who finally spoke to Uldyssian. “Keep perfectly still. Don’t do a damned thing, Uldyssian, except put your hands behind you—”

“I’m not the cause of all this!” the farmer insisted, knowing all the while that his protests were as futile as ever. “You just have to listen

to me—”

“There’re archers positioned,” Dorius anxiously interrupted. “Please listen to reason, Uldyssian...”

The farmer shook. No one would listen to him. He was surrounded by insanity. They saw in Uldyssian a murderer, a monster.

Distracted by his own turmoil, he almost did not notice a subtle motion by Tiberius. The headman’s words returned to him. Archers. Those who had once been his friends would rather kill him than understand his predicament.

“No!” Uldyssian cried out. “No!”

The ground shook. People toppled over. Something whistled past his ear.

As the tremor overtook Seram, a hand pulled Uldyssian away. It was not Mendeln’s, however, but Lylia’s.

“This is our only chance! Come!”

Unable—and unwilling—to think anymore, he allowed her to guide him out of the village. Although those around them seemed unable to keep their footing, neither the farmer nor the noblewoman had any difficulty.

Someone shouted his name. Despite Lylia’s tugging, Uldyssian looked back and saw Mendeln on all fours. His brother was trying to follow, but suffered the same trouble as the rest of Seram.

Ignoring Lylia’s protest, he went back for Mendeln. Mendeln took his hand and suddenly found his footing. Holding tight, Uldyssian led his brother from the chaos.

“Horses!” Mendeln shouted above the din. “We need horses!”

Uldyssian was about to argue that they had no time to secure even one animal let alone five, when suddenly a horse raced ahead of them. It was followed by several more, all bearing the saddles of the Cathedral of Light. They raced directly into the woods...and straight into the waiting hands of Achilios.

Skilled in dealing with animals, the hunter easily brought under control three. Serenthia managed to catch another, but let a fifth escape.

Uldyssian paused before the hunter, the two lifelong friends reading into each other’s gazes.

“We must be away from here,” Achilios finally said, thrusting the reins of two horses toward the farmer. “Away until they come to their senses.”

But both men knew that such a thing would never happen. Achilios and Serenthia could return, yes, and *would*, if the farmer had his way. However, Uldyssian—and by fault of blood, Mendeln—were likely saying good-bye to their home forever.

“We’ve only four mounts,” the trader’s daughter gasped. “Uldyssian, you and I could—”

“I shall ride with you, Uldyssian,” interjected Lylia. “She is welcome to the other horse.”

Serenthia looked ready to argue, but Uldyssian, reacting to the noblewoman’s words, had already returned one set of reins. Achilios quickly handed them to Mendeln, who eyed the reins as if they had turned into serpents.

“Mount up!” urged the archer. “The tremor seems to be subsiding!”

Sure enough, all was slowly quieting in Seram. Uldyssian wondered if the tremor would renew its throes if he willed it so, then cursed himself for even thinking of such a thing. Whether or not he was somehow responsible, enough people had already been harmed or even slain due to events. To wish for something that might endanger others further was to him nearly as terrible as the crimes to which he had been accused.

He glanced around at the few who had stood by him. Of all of them, Serenthia was the most innocent. Surely, she at least could return *now* rather than later.

“Serry! Go back to the village! No one likely saw you! Go back to your father and brothers—”

She gave him a defiant look. “Not until I know that you’re safe!”

To Uldyssian’s surprise, Achilios added his support to her rather than to his friend. “She should ride with us for a time until things are settled. Now, no more talk!”

“To the southeast!” Lylia declared without warning. “Ride to the southeast! We will be safest there!”

Unfamiliar with that region, Uldyssian looked at the hunter, but Achilios only shrugged. He had not been much farther from Seram than his companions.

Lylia leaned near Uldyssian’s ear, her breath warm and stimulating. “Trust me,” she whispered. “The southeast...”

“To the southeast, then!” he growled to the others. “And away from this madness...”

With the noblewoman’s arms locked around his waist and her soft head against his back, Uldyssian ul-Diomed urged his mount on. Behind him came the others, Achilios taking up the rear.

It would all resolve itself, the farmer insisted in his mind. It would all resolve itself. Somehow, sense would be made of everything and he would be able to begin his life again, albeit probably not anywhere near Seram. The ties he had had with the other villagers had been forever cut. He could never trust them again, just as they could never trust him. The accusations and the memories would always lurk in the

background.

But Uldyssian could start over elsewhere, forgetting all that had happened in Seram. A farmer only needed a good patch of land and a strong hand. He had both. He could build a new home and, just perhaps, make it large enough for a family. Lylia had sacrificed much for him. He had to mean something to her, whatever the difference in their bloodlines. Together, they would put behind their pasts and make a new future.

If the Cathedral and the Temple let them, that is...

Six

They paused that night near the edge of a hilly tract that overlooked in the distant part of the vast jungles that surrounded the more tamed central regions of Kehjan the land. It naturally fell to Achilios to hunt for game. Mendeln worked on a fire while Serenthia, Lylia, and Uldyssian ventured out a short distance in separate directions to see if they could find water and edible berries. More than happy to focus on something other than his predicament, the fugitive farmer wended his way farther than agreed, the stillness of the rolling forest calming his heart for the first time in days. Indeed, he savored the silence so much that, for a good part of the search, Uldyssian forgot what it was he was supposed to be doing.

His peace was abruptly shattered by the sound of rustling leaves. Uldyssian instinctively reached for the knife that he had long lost.

But as he realized his folly, a form pushed through to him. His heart raced, but out of pleasure, not fear.

"I am sorry," Lylia murmured, looking up at him. "I was frightened by myself! I—I wanted to be with you, Uldyssian..."

His blood raced as she put an ivory hand on his own. Her eyes caught what light there was from the foliage-obscured moon, making them almost glow like stars themselves.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he reassured her, savoring the touch. "Tomorrow, things'll be better. You'll see."

The noblewoman smiled. "How silly to hear *you* trying to calm *me*! 'Tis your life at threat, Uldyssian..."

"We're far from Seram now. They'll forget about me." It was obviously a lie, but the farmer had no idea what else to say.

"They will not. I think...Uldyssian, there is only one way to prevent us from having to run and run forever. I said something of it before and now that I have seen the wondrous gifts you possess, I think it more than ever."

He did not like where she was going with this. "Lylia..."

"Please..." Without warning, the blond noblewoman kissed him. It was long and lingering and filled Uldyssian with a yearning.

"We must go to the great city itself," she said once they had separated. "You must speak to the people! Not the mage clans or the nobles, but the *common* folk! They will understand you—"

He laughed harshly. "My own village didn't understand me! They saw me as some kind of horrible monster!"

"That was due to the awful circumstances, Uldyssian! If you go to the city, you start fresh! You have been given a gift most fantastic! They must be told!"

"And what am I supposed to preach to them? To follow me like some god or spirit or I'll tear them apart as I did the Cathedral's men? What could I give them except fear and loathing?"

Her expression turned solemn. She stared deep into his eyes. "You could give them the promise of becoming as *you* are! Of becoming more than the Cathedral or the Triune could ever claim for them!"

"Of becoming like me?" The farmer could scarcely believe his ears. Was she mad? "Why would they want to become like me? To suffer as I have? For that matter, I still don't even know exactly if I believe it all in the first place—"

Lylia put a finger to his lips. "Then test it again. One last time. Here and now."

"Test—"

"The final proof." She looked around. "There. Something small but significant. Impossible to deny."

The noblewoman led him toward a bush of the type for which they had been searching. However, this one was withered and, in addition to wrinkled leaves, had only a few shriveled berries to offer.

"What am I supposed to do?" growled Uldyssian anxiously.

"Touch it. Imagine what you want of it. That is all."

He recalled the last time that he had done as she had asked. It was still possible to question what exactly had happened then. Here, though...

But he could not deny her. *Imagine what you want of it*, Lylia had said. Uldyssian nervously shrugged. What *would* he want from the bush other than some fresh berries? But the plant was long past that and, in fact, looked near to dying. If it had been younger, full of life, surely it would have offered a bounty for them.

He let his fingers graze the dry bush. The leaves and branches were brittle to his touch. The plant was not dying; it was *dead*.

There was no point in continuing. "Lylia—"

She softly placed her hand atop his, keeping it on in contact with the dead bush. "Please...just this once more."

Despite his wariness, he wanted nothing more than to please her. With her hand still atop his own, the son of Diomedes thought of the bush and the juicy, ripe crop he would have liked to have found. Enough to feed them all. After the troubles he and the others had suffered in part due to these supposed powers, it was the least he

could ask—

With a gasp, Uldyssian suddenly tore his hand back from the bush.

Unlike when he had concentrated on the storm over Seram, there was no hesitation between his desire and the fruition of it. Even in the dim moonlight, the transformation he now beheld could not be mistaken for anything short of miraculous.

The bush stood swollen several times its emaciated size and was now covered in lush leaves. From the few dried berries had burst a cornucopia of fresh, fat ones. They were not restricted to those native to the bush, either, for Uldyssian could easily make out more than half a dozen distinct variations. Blossoms also dotted the rejuvenated plant, filling the vicinity with a sweet scent.

In comparison to the storm, it was a small thing, this transformation, but it forever put to death for the farmer any doubt that *he* wielded powers beyond his imagination.

And that very realization made him tremble as he never had before, not even when facing the guards of the Cathedral.

“Why do you shake so?” asked Lylia, coming around him. “Look!” The beautiful noblewoman reached out and snatched some of the berries. She thrust them in her mouth, eating with gusto. Her eyes widened in merriment as she ate. “Delicious!” Lylia concluded. “Taste for yourself!”

Before he could decline, she had torn off another bunch and brought them to his lips. Her face she planted in his chest, eyes ever on his own.

Uldyssian could do nothing but accept the bounty. Lylia placed the berries into his mouth, her fingers lingering for a moment.

“Taste them,” she repeated, slowly removing her hand.

Never in his life had Uldyssian come across such flavor. Each berry was a treasure unto itself, as sweet as the sweetest wine...

“The power within you should be feared only by those who envy you! When all others see the good it creates, they will understand... and then...then, you can teach them...”

“T—Teach them?”

“What I spoke of before! To see the potential within them to be as you! To show them that they need not cower to mage clans, Temples, or Cathedrals, Uldyssian! To know that within each is a glory beyond the conceiving of any would-be prophet or cleric...” She halted. “I speak from knowledge, my love. You *can* show them the way...I know it! Watch...watch...”

The noblewoman reached out to one of the blossoms, touching it softly with the tip of her index finger.

And from within the flower burst a tiny stem ending in an oval

berry. The berry swelled quickly, then broke open, revealing a small, curled flower. That, in turn, opened wide. As Uldyssian gaped, a twin of the original blossom formed.

"It worked! I knew it! I felt it!" Lylia's laughter was music. "I have felt it ever since you healed me, as if what you did somehow stirred to waking a force within! It is not much, compared to what you have accomplished, but it is something..." She turned to him again, her voice taking on a determined edge. "You woke it in me, my love! Therefore, you can do the same for others! No false prophets will be able to fill their ears with lies after you are done! No one will ever be given empty promises, useless hopes! And all because of you!"

Her words swirled around him, both daunting...and tempting. In his mind, the farmer relived the deaths of his family and the cloying ways of the clerics who had come to take advantage of his grief. His anxiety and fear gave way to outrage again.

Lylia pulled his face down to hers, her lips barely an inch from his. "How many more are there who have suffered like you, my dear Uldyssian? You could see to it that it never happens again!"

No more clerics. No more Triune. No more Cathedral of Light. Men would depend upon themselves, guide themselves...

The son of Diomedes grinned. He liked the sound of that.

"And I..." Lylia breathed. "I will stand with you at all times. The two of us always together, always...one."

She kissed him long and longingly...then led him to the soft ground...

Serenthia huddled by the fire, on a small cloth her meager find. Most of the berries were hardly edible, but at least they were there. She had found a few flowers worth eating, too.

Mendeln stood across from her, peering into the dark beyond the campfire. Achilios was not expected for a time, but Uldyssian and Lylia should have been back by now and both there knew it. Mendeln only worried about his brother's safety, while the thoughts of the trader's daughter were far more complicated.

"She's with him," Serenthia murmured, her tone hinting of an emotion that Mendeln ever found uncomfortable. Women in Seram had never found him of interest and he, in turn, had never figured out exactly how to change that.

"It is possible, I suppose." He tried to change the subject. "I hope that Achilios can catch at least one rabbit. There was little but dried rations in the guards' saddlebags."

"I worry about him, Mendeln," she went on. "When that woman is

with him, Uldyssian loses track of reason.”

“Surely not. I know my brother well.”

Serenthia abruptly rose, causing her companion to step back in surprise. “All she’s got to do is whisper in his ear and he follows her like a puppy!”

“Love will do that,” he replied before realizing just what he had said. To his horror, Serenthia gazed at him as if he had just shoved a dagger into her heart. “What I mean to say is—”

Thankfully, his babbling was interrupted by the arrival of not Uldyssian, but Achilios. The hunter carried two rabbits and a bird in his left hand and wore a smile on his face that evaporated when he noted Serenthia’s expression.

“Serry...what?” He looked from her to Mendeln and the burning gaze was enough to make Uldyssian’s brother feel like the next quarry in Achilios’s hunt. “You *told* her? Mendeln! How could you? Serry, I’m so sorry about your father—”

Mendeln sought to wave him to silence, but it was too late. Now the terrible expression that she had focused on the younger son of Diomedes was turned against the archer. “*What about my father?*”

Achilios suddenly started toward Mendeln as if not hearing her. “Help me make these ready, Mendeln! They’ll take a while to cook, so we’d better work fast—”

“*Achilios!*” Cyrus’s daughter stepped around the fire, coming between the two men. “What happened to my father?” She glanced at Uldyssian’s sibling. “You know, too?”

“Serenthia, I—”

She only grew more distraught. “Something’s happened to him! I want to know what!”

Abandoning his catch, the hunter seized her by the shoulders. Mendeln had thought of doing the same, but, as was usual in dealing with women, he was generally a second behind the actions of other men.

“Serry...” All the merriment Achilios usually displayed had utterly vanished. “Serry...Cyrus is dead.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No...no...no...”

“It is true,” Mendeln added as cautiously as he could. “It was...an accident.”

“*How?*”

Uldyssian’s brother hesitated. “A portion of roof torn off by the wind.”

The dark-haired woman looked down. “The wind...”

Mendeln feared she would blame Uldyssian, but instead Serenthia slumped down by the fire again. Putting her face in her hands, she

began to cry.

It was Achilios who went to her side first. The archer put a comforting arm around his companion. There was nothing but compassion and concern in either his expression or his actions. Mendeln was aware just how much Achilios cared for Serenthia, more so than anyone including himself. Certainly in a different manner than Uldyssian, who had never truly ceased seeing her as the young girl tagging along.

But knowing Serenthia as he did, Mendeln pitied the hunter. Here was one quarry all his skills could not catch for him.

Feeling uncomfortable, Mendeln slipped away from the campfire. Achilios had brought them enough food, and once matters calmed, they could all get to work preparing it. For now, all he desired was to leave Serenthia in the care of the archer.

It was not simply out of respect that he left the trader's daughter to Achilios, no. As he slipped into the dark woods, Mendeln knew that he had departed as much for the sake of his own mind. What would he have said next to Serenthia...that her father had been calling for her *after* his death? That he could have sworn that he had seen Cyrus standing above the wreckage of his own *body*?

Slumping against a tree, Mendeln tried to understand what was happening to him. The blackouts, the dirt on his fingers, and finally the voice and the vision—they all pointed at madness.

Yet, what he had witnessed around his brother could have also been called that. Certainly, Uldyssian had appeared to think so.

And Uldyssian had clearly been wrong. Mendeln carried proof of that himself. The savage scar left by the whip was no more. It had healed, possibly during the brothers' flight from Seram. Certainly, by the time they had stopped for the night, it had utterly vanished.

Although the night air was cool, Mendeln felt the sweat dripping down his face. Wiping it away, he tried to calm himself. His brother needed him more than ever. He had to focus only on that. Only on—

He was being watched.

Mendeln spun to his right and in that moment glimpsed a figure in black robes and what seemed an odd, segmented armor. The face was utterly obscured by a tremendous hood.

Then, just as with the shade of Cyrus...the figure was no longer there.

It was too much for him. Whirling back in the direction of the camp, Mendeln started to run.

A huge shape dropped down from the trees, landing on all fours in front of the farmer. Even crouched, it was nearly as high at the shoulder as Mendeln was tall and when it stood, even hunched over it

was more than half again his height.

The thing opened a mouth much like a frog's. The dim moonlight could not hide from the human the row upon row of daggerlike teeth and the thick tongue darting from within. Above, half a dozen black orbs glistened with an unholy light of their own.

"Meeeeeatttt..." it rasped, extending two appendages ending in sharp claws as long as the human's hand. Behind the monstrosity, a thick tail thumped eagerly against the ground. "Cooommme toooo mmmmeeee, mmmmeeeeaaaatttt..."

Mendeln had no intention of obeying, but his body evidently had other, more horrific notions in mind. First one foot, then another, slowly, inexorably, dragged him toward the waiting talons of the fiend.

A stench filled his nostrils, the smell of what seemed a hundred years' worth of rotting carrion. The thing waited as he neared it. It could have already ripped out his throat or disemboweled him, but from its rapid breathing clearly enjoyed the fear rushing through its victim.

Mendeln wanted to cry out, but could not. However, as the creature loomed over him, its maw dripping with saliva, an image flashed through Mendeln's mind, an image of symbols familiar to him. They were akin to those on the ancient stone to which Achilios had led him, with some new ones mixed between. Oddly, where last time he had utterly failed to make any sense of them, now Mendeln knew how to pronounce each.

Which he did without urging.

The giant creature suddenly let out a snarl of confusion. It turned from Mendeln, looking past him. One taloned appendage thrust just next to the stunned human. The beast sniffed the air, its mood clearly much angrier.

Only then did the farmer realize that the fiend was now *blind*...

Mendeln also realized that he controlled his movements again. Not questioning his good fortune, he cautiously stepped to the opposite side. The beast turned, but away from him. Holding his breath, Mendeln took another step further on.

He must have made some sound, for the fiend spun in his direction and swiped the air with one massive paw. Although Mendeln moved as quickly as he could, the tips of one talon caught the sleeve of his garment. He twirled helplessly in a circle before crashing to the ground. At the same time, his mind for some reason took objection to the fact that the demon could hear. Somehow, Mendeln felt that the blindness should have been accompanied by a deafness as well.

The creature reached for him—

There was a shout and then the hiss of an arrow. Mendeln heard a thump, followed by a furious snarl from his inhuman attacker. He felt the beast turn from him.

“Move, Mendeln!” Achilios called. “Move!”

He obeyed, but not without shouting back, “The eyes! It is blind for the moment, but shoot the eyes!”

Likely he had not had to tell the trained hunter what to do, but Achilios had saved him and Mendeln owed his friend what little aid that he could give. The sudden sightlessness of the beast was the only advantage that they had at the moment, if even that could be called so.

“Mmmmoorrree mmmmeeeeaaatrrrrt...” mocked the thing. “Wheerrre arrre yyyyoou?”

Achilios let loose with another arrow, but although blind, his target somehow sensed it coming and moved aside. The wooden shaft bounced harmlessly off its scaled hide. Mendeln saw only then that the first bolt stuck in the monster just under the arm, where the flesh was less covered. Achilios had been fortunate with that initial attempt; the rest of the creature’s form was very much protected.

As the archer readied another shot, the abomination leapt like a frog in his general direction. However, from the monster’s side, Serentia lunged forward, gripped in both hands a thick, burning branch from the fire. Had the giant been able to see, she would have surely perished, but instead the blindness enabled the trader’s daughter to bring the flames right against the vulnerable orbs.

A howl that tore into the very core of Mendeln’s soul ripped through the area. A new stench filled the air, that of burning flesh.

The injured fiend swung wildly. Serentia could not escape his reach. His talons slashed her back. She crumpled, then lay still.

“Serry!” Like a man possessed, Achilios fired upon the beast. This time, he caught it in one of the other orbs. The giant howled anew, then tore the shaft from the ruined socket.

As it turned again on the hunter, Mendeln realized that its sight had come back. With that also returned another danger, one of which only he was aware.

“Look not in its eyes, Achilios!” he shouted desperately. “It will draw you to it, then!”

His warning came too late. Achilios stiffened, the bow dropping from his hands. The hunter’s arms went slack and he stood motionless before the oncoming horror. The beast laughed—a terrible, grating sound—then reached for the helpless tidbit.

But the talons halted just before Achilios, unable to touch the prey. The next moment, the earth beneath the fiendish creature seemed to

liquefy. It tried to pull back, but its legs only sank deeper into the soil.

The beast looked around for an immediate cause, but found none. "Wwwwhatttt?" it roared. "Wwwhhhhooo?"

Its gaze fixed upon Mendeln, the only one in sight. Without thinking, he shook his head in denial of responsibility. Nonetheless, the scaled horror tried to turn toward him, the better to focus its hypnotic gaze.

As it did, the liquid earth now rose up its legs, as if impatient to take the beast. Mendeln suddenly forgotten, the creature struggled to remove itself...but to no avail.

The ground crawled ever upward, quickly enveloping the torso. One set of talons tore at it, only to become ensnared as if in solidifying honey. The trapped beast tried to use its other talons to pull free the one limb, only to have that also caught.

Within seconds, all that remained uncovered was the grotesque head. The creature twisted its head upward, then rasped, "Gggrrreaatttt Llllucionnnn! Ssssavvve yyyyyooourrr llloyyyyall sssservvvvanntttt! Gggggreeeeaaattt Llllucionnn! Ssssavvve! Grreeeatttt—"

With one last swift effort, the ground sealed over the froglike mouth, finally entombing its victim.

Achilios let out a grunt, shook, then dropped to his knees. Mendeln cautiously rose, not completely confident that the monster was no more. At last, he moved to Serenthia's side and gingerly inspected the wounds. They were horribly deep, but at least she was still alive. How long that would be, though—

"I'll see to her, Mendeln, don't you worry," Uldyssian's voice suddenly said.

The elder brother stood on the opposite side of the stricken woman. Mendeln eyed his brother with almost as much surprise as he had the beast. Despite the night, Uldyssian stood perfectly visible, as if a light within illuminated him. He was bare-chested, but seemed unmoved by the cool air.

There was a look in Uldyssian's face, a look that Mendeln could not read but that somehow made him feel more insignificant than ever. As his brother knelt down by Serenthia, Mendeln involuntarily slunk back, as if not worthy to be so close at such a time.

Seemingly ignorant of his brother's reaction, Uldyssian placed his hands palm-down an inch or so above Serenthia's torn back. He then stared at the wounds, while Mendeln watched in wonder and curiosity.

And as the younger brother watched, each of the terrible, crimson valleys healed themselves. The ends first tapered, drawing the wounds

together as if by invisible needle and thread. The slashes themselves then shrank rapidly, in many cases going from over a foot long to a bare scar in less than three beats of Mendeln's racing heart.

One more beat...and Serenthia's back became completely unmarred again.

A slight moan escaped her. She started to move. Nodding in satisfaction, Uldyssian stepped back, the light within seeming to fade now.

It was Achilios, naturally, who proved to have the presence of mind to remove his own shirt and cover Serenthia as she started to rise. Mendeln, meanwhile, stood up to face his brother.

"What...what did you just do?"

"What had to be done, of course." Uldyssian looked at him as if Mendeln had asked why crops needed rain.

"But...how?" The younger son of Diomedes shook his head. "No, that is not what I mean...Uldyssian...everything that happened in Seram...was that you?"

Now seeming more as Mendeln knew him, Uldyssian slowly nodded. "It must've been." He nodded toward the macabre monument that was all that remained of the abomination. "And that, I won't deny doing."

"What was that thing?" snapped Achilios, still holding a stunned Serenthia. "Those talons...and those eyes..."

It was Lylia who answered, Lylia appearing behind Uldyssian almost as abruptly as he had moments earlier. The noblewoman wrapped her arms possessively around Mendeln's brother, saying, "It is the murderer they sought in Seram, obviously. The fiend that slew the two missionaries. What else could it be?"

Uldyssian, Achilios, and Serenthia took her answer to heart and even Mendeln had to admit that it was an obvious statement. Certainly, the condition of the one acolyte's corpse made sense when seeing the horrible talons. The creature was also cunning, even speaking the tongue of men with ease. Surely it had frozen each victim with its gaze, then done its foul work. It also moved extremely fast, which would explain the short time between the murders.

Yet, he found himself not entirely convinced. More to the point, something else about the abomination disturbed him. "But how does it come to be here? We are far from Seram."

"Why, it followed Uldyssian, naturally! After all, everyone thought that he was the one to blame. If it slew him, then no suspicion of its foul existence would remain!"

Again, another reasonable explanation, but for some reason Mendeln could not see the creature pursuing Uldyssian so far just for

that. There had never been any suggestion by either the village or the Master Inquisitor that such an unnatural beast could be responsible. Everyone had thought of the murderer as human and far too many had assumed it to be Uldyssian.

Something else came to mind. “It *called* to somebody,” he blurted. “At the end, it called to somebody.”

“Aye,” interjected Achilios as he helped Serenthia to stand. “I heard it, too.”

Lyliā’s grip on Uldyssian tightened. “It was nothing.”

But the elder son of Diomedes nodded to Mendeln. “I heard, too, but the name escaped me.”

Mendeln concentrated, reliving the moment. “Great...Great *Lucion*. Lucion.” For some reason, merely speaking it made him shudder. “That was the name.”

Unfortunately, knowing it meant nothing to him, nor did he see any recognition on the faces of anyone else. Not even when Mendeln studied Lyliā’s as close—and as surreptitiously—as possible did he see any hint of knowledge.

“He must be with one of the mage clans,” Uldyssian suddenly declared, his eyes brightening dangerously. “The murdered ones were emissaries from the Temple and the Cathedral. Who else would hunt such?”

“Yes,” Lyliā immediately agreed, sounding to Mendeln’s ears almost pleased with his brother’s quick thinking. “The mage clans. Surely them. Do you not agree, Mendeln?”

She gave him a smile such as he had seen her so far reserve only for his brother. Mendeln felt himself flush.

“The mage clans,” he blurted, nodding at the same time. “Of course.” Yet, Mendeln wondered why any of the mage clans, so desperate to hold their own against each other, would bother with two lowly emissaries in a backwater village.

Everyone else seemed satisfied. Uldyssian looked around at the others as if they were his children. “We can worry about that later. This only proves my decision the right one.”

Mendeln had a bad feeling. “Your decision?”

“Seram is part of my past now, not my present or future.” As Uldyssian spoke, Lyliā—leaving one arm around his waist—moved to his side. “I never asked for this, but something’s granted me a gift—”

“A gift? You call what happened a gift?”

“Hush, Mendeln.”

He looked in surprise at Serenthia, who was the one who had spoken. Of all people there, Uldyssian’s brother would have expected her to call the things that had happened horrible, certainly not a gift.

Yet, now she spoke with what he realized was awe...awe of Uldyssian.

Mendeln looked to Achilios, but the hunter did not appear willing to contradict the emotions of the woman he loved. He kept his expression set.

"A gift, yes," Uldyssian went on, as if Mendeln were a small child in need of simple words. "Something inside *all* of us, in fact." He paused, smiling. "Let's get back to camp. I'll explain everything. Then, as soon as we're done eating, we need to get some rest. After all, the journey to Kehjan will take several days' riding."

"Kehjan?" Mendeln nearly choked on the name, so unexpected was it. They were now going to *Kehjan*? "But...but what about the sea?"

"Kehjan," Uldyssian repeated, gazing down at Lylia. "Where best to begin changing the *world*?"

As he and the noblewoman drank in one another, Mendeln looked in dismay at Serenthia and Achilios. *The world*? Had he just heard his brother correctly? He looked to the other pair for some understanding, even help, but, to his dismay, the trader's daughter seemed caught between her awe of this new Uldyssian and her jealousy of Lylia, while the hunter only stared longingly at *her*. No one but Mendeln seemed to grasp the enormity of the moment properly.

No one but he seemed to understand that his brother was surely heading toward his certain doom...and very likely taking the others with him.

Malic angrily shut the tiny, jeweled box he had been given by the Primus. The green, circular gem situated in one of the four slots had crumbled to ash but a moment before, signifying its sudden worthlessness to the high priest. The hunter he had summoned was no more.

But anger mixed with growing interest, for he had been sent to investigate emanations felt by his master, investigate and, if it proved that they came from some person, bring that one back to the Temple for study and possible conversion. Now, at least, Malic knew that he was not on some wild chase.

Still, frowning, the tall cleric thrust the box back into the pouch on his belt, then returned to his horse. A hooded, armored Peace Warder handed Malic the reins, then retreated to his own mount. Behind them, a full score more well-armed warriors of the faithful sat ready to ride wherever their leader commanded and do whatever was necessary. They, of course, did not understand the entire truth concerning the Temple of the Triune, but they did understand *enough* to know, like Malic, that to not succeed in this mission was

unthinkable.

Malic eyed them, seeking any weakness or hesitation, then looked ahead. The dark of night did not affect him, a gift of the Primus. Malic saw the path ahead as perfectly as he did during the day.

Soon, the high priest thought. *Soon*. They were not far from their goal, the steeds granted them by his master swifter than any. Their appearance might be that of sleek black stallions, but that was mere illusion for the foolish masses. No mortal animal could have covered so much ground in so little time.

“Forward,” Malic commanded, urging his own beast on.

The prize was not far. A demon might fail, but the high priest would not. Malic had not risen to be the Primus’s right hand without effort. His hands were stained with the blood of his rivals, both figuratively and truly. He *would* succeed.

Again, there was *no* other choice.

SEVEN

Uldyssian rode a changed man. Never in his life had he considered himself a champion of the people, a transformer of a world. He had been content to be a farmer, tilling the soil, raising his crops, and seeing to his animals. How short-sighted, how simple, that all seemed now. He did not question his almost overnight shift in thought and purpose any more than he now questioned the force swelling within him. It had happened and that was all that mattered.

A great part of the change in Uldyssian could be attributed to the woman riding behind him. When he listened to Lylia, everything made sense. Everything seemed possible. Uldyssian was grateful not only for her presence, but her knowledge and experience. She knew the world outside of Seram, especially the pitfalls and other traps. She also understood the yearning of the masses to no longer be subject to the mercurial machinations of the mage clans or corrupt sects such as the Triune or the Cathedral. With her at his side, Uldyssian felt as if he could do *anything*.

It was all planned out, at least in his mind. Ride into the vast city and seek a place in the great public square, where many would-be prophets came to preach. However, where they were looked upon as fools and madmen, matters would be different for Uldyssian. He could *show* the people the path, the gift, that he offered. They would see that he was no charlatan. Once his first audience saw the truth, the word would spread like wildfire *everywhere*.

He glanced to his right, where his brother rode. Mendeln watched the path ahead, just like the others, but Uldyssian knew that his sibling was one person in the party who did not fully appreciate what he intended. Mendeln had been hesitant from the beginning, bringing up suggestions and reasons for caution.

But Lylia had countered those concerns with strong words of her own, further empowered by her tragic tale. Caution and hesitation only allowed those who would be jealous of Uldyssian's gift to act. Innocents might suffer, then, as had happened with the noblewoman and her family.

No, Uldyssian was absolutely certain of his course. He loved his brother, but if Mendeln continued to fail to see things as they should be, then Uldyssian would have to deal with him somehow. It would not look good for his own blood to seem less than an absolute believer

in what Uldyssian was doing—

The farmer grimaced. What sort of thoughts were these? His brother meant *everything* to him! Only Mendeln's presence had kept him from losing his mind when the rest of their family had perished.

Shame filled Uldyssian. He could not imagine life without his brother...

He'll come to understand, the older son of Diomedes assured himself. *Mendeln will come to understand...*

He *had* to.

They rode that day and the next toward their destination without so much as meeting a soul. To Uldyssian, life in Seram seemed more and more merely a bad dream as anticipation of the city grew.

Achilios went ahead to scout the way, something that Uldyssian felt unnecessary—considering his power—but did not argue against. The archer did not return to the party until well after they had made camp, bringing with him a pair of good-sized hares for food.

"I sighted smoke far in the distance just before sunset," Achilios remarked, giving the hares to Mendeln and Serenthia. "A town, maybe." With a smile, he added, "Perhaps somewhere where we could get a good ale!"

Mendeln closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "Partha. I think that there's a town in this region called Partha."

One of Mendeln's favorite pastimes when in Cyrus's establishment was to listen to where travelers came from and to inspect the trader's collection of maps. In regards to the latter, Mendeln had an almost perfect memory.

"A good-sized place?" Uldyssian asked with growing interest.

"Larger than Tulisam, I believe, yes. On a direct route between the great city and the largest seaports."

Partha sounded ideal to Uldyssian in more ways than one. It had occurred to him, somewhat belatedly, to test himself on a simpler place than Kehjan. A few days in Partha would remove any doubt, especially from Mendeln, about Uldyssian's ability to show people the gift.

So far, despite the fact that each night Uldyssian tried to show them, only he and Lylia seemed able to draw upon whatever it was within. Serenthia appeared on the edge of making the leap, but something held her back. As for Achilios, he looked content with his skills as a hunter, which, for the first time, Uldyssian believed drew in a different manner from the same source as the farmer's abilities. Certainly, Achilios had always been a very, very fortunate hunter. There was still hope there, but long-term.

As for Mendeln, he seemed furthest of all from realizing his own

abilities. Uldyssian did not understand why, having assumed that his brother would be the most adept other than himself. Lylia had, the night before, come up with what appeared to be the best answer so far. As with Achilios, it was very likely Mendeln's own personality that held him back.

But that was a matter that could also wait, at least for the moment. The town offered many, many new options.

"Partha..." he murmured.

Lylia leaned close, then, almost nuzzling his ear. Uldyssian did not miss Serenthia's brief look of dejection at this.

"We should really continue straight to the city," the noblewoman whispered. "The sooner the greatest number of people can hear and see you, the sooner the transformation of the world can begin..."

"Yes, you're right," Uldyssian returned, immediately seeing her point and wondering why he had even bothered thinking of a tiny, insignificant place such as Partha. "Straight to the city. That's best."

Achilios looked disappointed, but nodded. Serenthia's face was a mask. Mendeln appeared perturbed, but Uldyssian was used to seeing his brother so. No one protested; that was all that was important.

Still, Uldyssian needed to test himself. He finally rose from Lylia's grip. "Serry, would you come with me?"

Her eyes momentarily brightened...then the mask returned. She also rose. "Of course...of course..."

"Uldyssian—" Lylia called.

"I won't be long," he assured her.

The blond woman turned her gaze to the fire and said nothing.

Taking Serenthia's hand, Uldyssian led her past an uncomprehending Achilios and Mendeln. He guided the trader's daughter into the forest until the light of the camp could no longer be seen, then turned her to face him.

Serenthia waited expectantly. Uldyssian considered his words carefully before saying, "I'm sorry again about Cyrus, Serry. So very sorry."

"Uldyssian, I—"

He put a finger to her lips. "Serry, he may have died because of me —"

She pulled back. "No!" Lowering her voice, Serenthia added, "No, Uldyssian. I've thought about it a lot while we've been traveling. Perhaps...perhaps the storm came from you...I still don't know...but you never meant harm. Brother Mikelius was condemning you as a heretic! If you somehow caused the storm, then it was because *he* forced it on you! You were only *defending* yourself!"

He looked at her in surprise. Hearing this from one he knew who

had cared deeply for her father—and had long respected both major sects—Uldyssian felt tremendous relief. Until then, he had not realized how much he had still worried inside about how the trader's death had affected her.

"Serry, even thinking that...why didn't you return home instead of following me into the unknown? Your brothers...they'll fear for you..."

"I am old enough to find my own way in the world," she said with some of her old defiance. Planting her hands on her hips, Serenthia added, "Thiel and the rest will know what I did and they'll leave me to my own actions, as always."

She said it with such finality that Uldyssian could only smile ruefully. Even now, he would not try to dissuade her. Besides, it still comforted him to have her around, just as it did to have his brother and Achilios. "All right. I had to ask. I had to know. I won't say any more."

"But, I must say something...if you permit..." Once again, Cyrus's daughter became the awed follower.

"You don't need my permission."

"Uldyssian...I understand what you do and believe wholeheartedly in it." She cleared her throat. "But perhaps Mendeln's concern has some merit. I know Lylia says to ride straight to the city, but—"

He frowned. "Is this about Lylia, Serry?"

Although she shook her head, he could tell that it both was and was not. Uldyssian doubted that Serenthia could separate matters.

"No...I mean...Uldyssian...I've spoken with missionaries from both the Temple and the Cathedral and not all of them are like Brother Mikelius. I do think that there's some good in them—"

"Hardly," the son of Diomedes returned, growing stone-faced. Memories of the Master Inquisitor raced through his head.

Serenthia paused, visibly seeking a different tack. "It's just that...I know Lylia has experienced far more than us, but not everything she says is what we should do."

Her words only made Uldyssian defensive. "I listen to Lylia just as I listen to all of you. It just happens that her advice has made the most sense to me more often."

"More like all the time—"

"Enough." Uldyssian felt an unreasoning anger rising, but managed to smother it. He could see no reason to continue with the conversation. It had been his notion to clear the air between them in regards to her father and that had been done. Obviously, Uldyssian thought, putting to rest any emotions Serenthia had toward him would take longer. He would have to be patient. Yes, patient.

Reaching up, he placed one hand on her head as he had done when she had been only a child. “Serry,” he whispered. “You said you believe in what I’ve become, right?”

She nodded, her eyes still reflecting her thoughts on the previous subject.

“I know that what’s been awakened in me is trying to stir within you, too, but so far it’s not been able.”

“I’ve tried...” the young woman insisted.

His hand went to her shoulder, which he patted. “I know. Let me try to help guide it to awakening. Take my hands.” When she had obeyed, Uldyssian continued, “If this works, it will better help me understand how to show others once we reach Kehjan.”

“But what are...oh!”

Lyilia had suggested to him that it was their closeness, their melding to one, that had stirred the latent force within her. Obviously, Uldyssian could not share in that same manner with others—especially Serenthia—but he could try to come as close as possible. He focused on the woman before him, trying to see into her heart, into her soul. He tried to let the power flow from him into those places in the hope of igniting the flame.

It certainly felt to him as if what he did worked. A warmth entered his hands, a warmth he seemed to feel spreading from his companion. Serenthia, in turn, began to breathe rapidly and her eyes now looked up to the point where Uldyssian could see only the whites.

Then, to his surprise, Uldyssian felt stirring from her direction something akin to that which lurked within himself. He focused on Serenthia and was able to verify that it came from within the woman. It was slight in comparison, but the more he reached out to it, the stronger, more awake, it became.

He was awed by his own, swift success. Lyilia had been correct again. Uldyssian had managed to stir to life within Serenthia the same force.

Without warning, her body began to quiver uncontrollably. The whites were still the only thing visible of her eyes. She let out a small moan...

Uldyssian grew worried. Serenthia had just passed a mighty threshold, although the enormity of it would not be evident for some time. Still, it behooved him now to stop and let her move ahead on her own. Too quickly and something might happen to her.

As Uldyssian released her hands, the trader’s daughter let out a gasp and fell toward him. He caught her in his arms, holding her while she recovered.

“It felt like...” she finally managed. “...*feels* like...” But words failed

her after that.

"I know..." he finally replied, hoping to comfort her.

Serenthia suddenly stiffened. She pulled away from Uldyssian as if he was a leper...then rushed toward the direction of the camp.

Uldyssian stood baffled. He had expected something akin to the euphoria Lylia had told him that she had felt.

Serenthia vanished among the trees and shadows. Uldyssian, still confused, stared after her for a few seconds more before starting back himself. He was certain that he had done everything right. Why, then, had she reacted so?

When at first he stepped back into the camp, he saw no sign of her. Concerned, Uldyssian started to ask his brother, but Mendeln mutely shook his head, then nodded toward his right. There, half-obsured by the dark, lay Serenthia. She had one of the blankets procured from the Cathedral saddlebags around her and faced away from the camp.

Uldyssian took a step toward her, only to have Lylia come up and gently take his arm.

"It would be best to leave her be," the noblewoman whispered.

He opened his mouth to reply, then clamped it shut again. It seemed that, even with all that he had gained, there were some things that Uldyssian would never understand.

Come the morning, Serenthia acted as if nothing had happened, yet Uldyssian could with his own burgeoning powers sense that the force within her had grown stronger. She evinced no sign of this, though, and he finally decided that he would let *her* choose when to accept her gift. It was enough to know that she did wield it. That meant that he *would* be able to guide others toward the same direction and with practice the effort would surely grow quicker and easier.

They rode under an overcast sky that Uldyssian at one point bemusedly wondered if he could clear. He did not try, though, for fear that, if it did indeed worked, he would only be announcing his presence to those who might wish him to never make it to the city. Lylia had suggested to him that it would be better if he waited until in Kehjan before revealing himself so. Then, she said, it would be too late for them to hide the truth from the people.

Despite the continuous gloom, it did not rain and so once more they made good time. Partha remained a faint spiral of smoke in the distance, the only change the direction in which they had to look for it. By Mendeln's calculation and Lylia's confirmation, they would see a similar hint of the great city in three or four more days at the utmost.

The five finally also crossed paths with other travelers, in this case,

a wagon heading the opposite direction. The driver, a bearded elder with trade dealings at the seaports, greeted the party warily at first. His apprentice, a gangly, carrot-haired youth with watery eyes, anxiously kept his hand near a well-worn sword at his side.

As he still wished to reach Kejhan as soon as possible, Uldyssian decided that there was no use in revealing what he was to the pair. Instead, he sought from the trader news concerning the state of affairs in the legendary city.

“The mage clans have a truce going on at the moment, aye,” declared the stout figure as he lit a long, clay pipe. “It’ll last as well as the others, which’s to say not long at all. Possibly even over, already. The nobles, they watch and wait while they plot to their own advantage and the clans let’m keep some control over the city’s functions so’s that they can free up themselves to figure out how to get around the truce.” He chuckled darkly. “So, one might say all’s pretty much as always in Kehjan...”

His words verified for Uldyssian the importance of what Lylia had said about heading directly there rather than turn to Partha or any other lesser settlement. Uldyssian graciously thanked the trader, then led the others on.

They settled for the night on the bank of a sedate river coursing along the region. Here the line between woods and jungle blurred some. For the first time, Uldyssian came to understand just how small the forested region was in comparison with the great jungles said to be covering much of the realm. He had even heard traders pausing at Seram remark that it seemed that the jungles were gradually swallowing up all else. Obviously that could not be the truth, but, eyeing the odd, almost unnatural shift in environment, Uldyssian could not help still wonder a little.

He had hoped that the day’s ride would ease the tension between him and Serenthia, but the raven-haired woman yet again found reason to be away from him.

“It is best to let her work it out herself,” Lylia finally whispered to him as she nuzzled his cheek. “She will come to accept matters. You will see.”

Nodding, Uldyssian forced his attention to more important matters. Now that he was so near the city, his nerves had begun to act up. He admitted this to Lylia, who suggested that he retire early and let the rest of them see to things.

“You must be at your peak come the day we enter. Go, sleep. When there is food ready, I will bring it to you.”

She kissed him again, then departed. Uldyssian immediately followed her good advice. The ground beneath was soft and the night

warmer than previous. A short nap, he decided, was indeed the right thing for him. As usual, Lylia knew best. He could not imagine a future without her. It was as if Uldyssian had always known her.

With those comforting thoughts, he drifted off.

Serenthia knew that she had to come to grips with her conflicting emotions concerning Uldyssian. She believed in the goodness of what he had become, believed it enough to not even consider him at fault for her father's terrible fate, but at the same time she could not separate what he was from what he had once been...the man whom she had loved as no one else.

And who now loved another...a woman he had met only a short while before.

"We need more wood for the fire," Mendeln commented.

Seizing on the opportunity to be even more by herself, Serenthia quickly replied, "I'll go and gather it. You make certain that the fire doesn't die in the meantime."

She slipped out of the camp and began collecting small, broken branches. The search required little attention, which allowed her mind to wander to less confusing—and less painful—subjects. But Cyrus's daughter had gathered only roughly half an armful when a prickling sensation on her neck made her look over her shoulder.

"Lylia!" The presence of the noblewoman out here so startled Serenthia that she dropped several pieces of wood. She stared in disbelief at the blond figure.

The other woman strode up to her with footsteps as silent as a cat. "Forgive me," Lylia murmured. "I did not mean to scare you..."

"What...what are you doing out here? I don't need any help with the wood."

"I wanted to speak with you, that was all."

"Speak with me?" The trader's daughter feared that she knew the subject. "There's no need—"

Lylia moved closer. "But there is *every* need, dear Serenthia, every need." As she stared deep into the other woman's eyes, she set a soft hand on her arm. "You are special to Uldyssian and, thus, special to me. I want all his friends to be comfortable around me. I want you to think of me not just as his love, his future mate, but as *your* friend as well..."

If Lylia expected her words to comfort Serenthia, they had the opposite effect. An unreasoning distress filled Serenthia and the words "love" and "mate" rang in her head over and over. She felt utter shame that Lylia knew how jealous she had been. Serenthia struggled

against her swirling emotions, insisting to herself that they were exaggerated...but, in the end, they still proved too much for her.

Eyes tearing, she whirled from Lylia's grip. The kindling fell unnoticed from her arms. Serenthia ran, not caring which direction she headed. All that mattered was to be away, away from everyone who knew what she had been thinking.

Tree limbs snagged at her clothing. Serenthia stumbled several times on the uneven ground. She tripped once across an upward-turned root. None of these impediments caused her to pause and thus possibly regain her wits. Serenthia simply righted herself each time and continued running. Wild emotion clouded her mind.

A silhouetted form stepped out in front of her. Paying it no mind, she kept moving. Only when it seized her in a grip of steel did she start to come back to reality.

At which point she opened her mouth to scream.

One gauntleted hand quickly smothered her cry. Serenthia struggled to free herself, but another figure came up behind her, securing the trader's daughter.

The first figure leaned forward, his hooded form almost ghostlike. "Be silent, girl..." he hissed. "Or else you must be punished!"

She began to notice other, similar figures, men in hoods and armor. At first she took them for Inquisitor guards, but then a symbol on the breastplate of the foremost momentarily glittered in the moonlight, revealing the familiar triangle symbol of the Temple.

Serenthia tried to speak, to explain, but her effort garnered her only a swift and painful slap across the face.

"Brother Rondo! Have a care with the child!"

The voice was low and smooth and its kind tone reminded Serenthia of her father. A dark figure atop a monstrously huge stallion rode up to where the two men held her. As the tall rider dismounted, the hardened warriors surrounding Serenthia released her, then fell down on one knee. Although now not held, she felt a compulsion to follow their example.

"Forgive me, Eminence," grunted the one called Rondo anxiously.

"Your enthusiasm is commendable, your tact in need of work, brother." The gloved figure touched Rondo atop his covered head, then turned his attention back to Serenthia.

"My child, shiver not so at my coming. I am friend, not fear." Up close, his features became visible. In contrast to his pale skin, he had thick, wavy dark hair and a deep brow. An elegant mustache gave him a regal dignity. His smile, like his tone, reminded Serenthia of her father. "I am Malic, high priest of the Order of Mefis—"

"Of the Temple of the Triune," Serenthia finished somewhat

breathlessly. Instinctively, she bowed her head.

“A believer! How delightful!” Malic stretched out a hand to her, which, after a hesitation, the woman took. “And, I do apologize for the zealousness of Brother Rondo here. We are all eager to conclude our quest...”

His last words set Serenthia on edge. She instantly recalled everything that had happened in the village and how the Cathedral had immediately condemned Uldyssian without hearing his side. Suddenly, Malic’s presence no longer eased her mind.

Somehow, he must have read that, for the high priest cocked his head and remarked, “But come, my child! I told you, I am friend! I sense your withdrawal...” Without permission, his hand touched between her breasts. “And I sense, also...” Malic frowned. “...that you are *not* the one we seek. There is the spark of something within you, but it is too weak...”

Without meaning to, Serenthia blurted, “Uldyssian—”

Malic’s thick, dark brow rose. “‘Uldyssian’? Is that his name? And you think him the one we seek?”

She clamped her mouth shut.

Brother Rondo stirred from his kneeling position, but Malic waved him down again. The high priest leaned forward, until his face, and especially his eyes, filled Serenthia’s view.

“You are fearful. But why...unless...” He smiled wider, revealing perfect teeth. “Ah! The Cathedral! It surely must be! Inquisitors, no doubt!”

Still Serenthia said nothing, although his accurate guesswork made her wonder if he could read her thoughts.

“The Cathedral...small wonder you show such distrust. Brother Rondo, was there not news from one of our messengers of the deaths of not only one of our own, but also a servant of the Cathedral as well?”

“Aye, Eminence. In the village of Seram, it was said. The murder of our missionary was especially brutal—”

“Yes, yes.” Waving him to silence again, Malic said to Serenthia, “And the Cathedral did condemn your Uldyssian, did they not?”

“Yes,” she finally answered, some of her distrust fading again.

“Typical of their ways. If they cannot fathom something, they must be rid of it. Woe betide the day that the Prophet began preaching his blasphemies...” The high priest stepped next to Serenthia, his arm wrapping around her shoulder in a comforting manner. “But we are not the Cathedral, child. The Temple of the Triune has always preached a peaceful resolution to matters, you understand that? Good! I wouldnot have you believing that we come to do as they did!

Rather, we are here just to do the *opposite* and surely it must be a sign for both you and I that we should meet at this fortuitous moment! You can lead me to your Uldyssian and then all of our problems will be over...”

“But—” Serenthia found it hard to think. Her mind suddenly felt as muddled as when Lylia had spoken with her. Still, she still recalled some things. Uldyssian wanted to go to the city...and he certainly wanted nothing to do with *any* sect, be it the Cathedral *or* the Triune. “No. I can’t. Uldyssian wouldn’t want me to—”

Malic’s body tensed. Serenthia suddenly felt his arm slide back until his gloved fingers rested near the back of her skull. She felt a painful force there and tried to let out a cry, but her mouth would not work. Neither would her body. Only her mind functioned, but it was now a prisoner in an immobile shell.

“A shame you would not listen to reason, child,” the tall figure remarked in a voice no longer comforting. “But you will *still* lead us to your Uldyssian...” He looked at the Peace Warders. “To your mounts! Hurry!”

As the men rushed to their beasts, Malic led Serenthia to his own. Up close, something about the creature put her ill at ease, but her body, subject to the high priest’s will, would not let her pull back. Instead, she mounted up in front of her captor, who took the reins with one hand and held her tight with the other.

“Now,” he whispered in her ear in the same kind tone that he had first used, a tone that Cyrus’s daughter knew he used to mock her helplessness. “Now, my child. Show me the way.”

Serenthia’s left hand rose, pointing unerringly in the direction of the camp.

“Very good. Very good. Be sure to smile when you see your friend. I would hate to make him uneasy...”

The corners of her mouth rose. Malic chuckled quietly...then urged his mount forward.

EIGHT

A sense of disquiet pervaded Uldyssian in his sleep. He felt as if some malevolent presence suddenly hovered over him, seeking his soul while he lay undefended.

His uneasiness became so great that Uldyssian started into waking. However, instead of some fiend such as had attacked the party, he looked up into Lylia's perfect face. The noblewoman knelt at his side.

"Are you ill, my love?" she whispered.

"How long—how long have you been there?"

"I just returned. You looked so peaceful I did not wish to disturb you. I apologize if I did."

Uldyssian frowned. Now that he was awake, the disquiet magnified...only it seemed to have something more to do with their surroundings.

"Lylia..." he muttered. "Go join the others by the fire. Go right now."

"Why?" Her eyes widened. "What is the matter?"

"Just do it..." Rising swiftly, Uldyssian all but pushed the blond woman toward the center of the camp. As he did, he saw to his dismay that only Mendeln was present.

"Where's Achilios?" he demanded of his brother. "Where's Serry?"

"Achilios has gone hunting." Mendeln glanced about. "I believe Serenthia should be nearby. She only went to gather a bit more wood —"

"I am sure that she will be back shortly," interjected Lylia, attempting to calm the tall farmer. "There is no cause for concern, Uldyssian..."

But he felt otherwise. Something was close, very close. Something was—

There was a rustling sound from behind Mendeln. Startled, Uldyssian's brother scurried toward the others.

Serenthia stepped into the campsite.

Uldyssian began to exhale...and then another, dark-haired figure joined the trader's daughter. He was even taller than Uldyssian and, while slimmer, clearly very fit. The newcomer wore a kindly expression and his manner reminded Uldyssian in some ways of his father...but all that became moot as he realized just what garments

the man wore.

They were those of a *cleric* of the Temple of the Triune. A high-ranking cleric, at that.

“Uldyssian,” Serenthia called. “I have a friend with me. His name is Malic and he wants to help.”

Uldyssian hid a frown. She of all people should have known how he would react to a cleric’s presence, especially after the chaos in Seram. True, Serenthia had always been something of a believer, but he had thought that behind her now. What was she thinking?

“I have come to offer the protection of the Triune,” Malic graciously added, spreading his gloved hands as if to show he carried no weapon. The flames of the campfire reflected brilliantly in his gaze, which fixed upon Uldyssian’s with an almost magnetic pull. “This child has told me of the terrible injustice perpetrated on you in the name of the Cathedral of Light. The Triune frowns on such monstrous behavior. We would keep you from threat from the agents of the Prophet...”

Despite everything that had happened to him, despite his deep abhorrence of Malic’s ilk, Uldyssian found himself half-wanting to listen to the man. There was just something understanding about the cleric. He seemed to feel the pain still buried deep in the farmer’s gut. Uldyssian opened his mouth to welcome the man to their camp—

But, at that moment, the fire *erupted*, briefly bursting to a height greater than that of the cleric. Malic instinctively pulled back from the wild flames...and as he did, he also tore his gaze from Uldyssian.

The farmer felt as if a blanket had been torn from over his head. It was as if he had been blind and could not *see* again...and only then did he understand that Malic had briefly *mesmerized* him.

“Serry!” Uldyssian roared, his rage immediately swelling. “Come to me! Hurry!”

There was a hesitation, as if at first she either did not hear him or for some reason could not obey. Then, with a violent shiver, the dark-tressed woman cried out and fled from Malic’s side. The cleric took a belated grab at her, then glared at Uldyssian.

And no sooner had Serenthia escaped than the camp filled with hooded and armored figures either on horseback or on foot. Uldyssian had seen their like before, seen them and been repulsed by them as he had by the Cathedral’s Inquisitors. “Peace Warders” they might call themselves, but the warriors of the Triune were no better than the cutthroats commanded by the unlamented Brother Mikelius. All they sought was control of the minds and souls of the people. Those who did not kneel to them—those like Uldyssian—they found ways to condemn.

In the blink of an eye, the farmer relived the calamity in Seram. He saw the hatred and heard once more the lies...

"No!" he growled at the oncoming figures. "Not again!"

The air rippled.

As if struck by an invisible hand, the Peace Warders went flying back in every direction. Two crashed against the nearby trees, striking so hard that they wrapped around the trunks like vines. Another warrior flew up several yards above the ground, disappearing in the foliage. The rest lay scattered and stunned around the outskirts of the campsite.

"Impressive," declared Malic in the same fatherly voice. Unlike his minions, he stood untouched by whatever force had acted. "What you could be taught, with just a little conditioning. What you could be taught..." His eyes narrowed, once more the flames reflecting strong in them.

A heavy weight all but crushed Uldyssian to his hands and knees. He felt as if it would soon bury him in the hard soil. Every muscle strained, every vein pounded. His head seemed ready to explode. The farmer turned his gaze aside, but still could not break free of whatever spell the cleric cast. He saw that Mendeln and Serenthia suffered worse than him, for they were already flattened against the earth. Of Lylia, Uldyssian could see nothing, but the thought of her also fighting to live gave him at last the impetus to push himself up on one knee.

"A very strong will," the robed figure remarked. "The master will savor breaking it further."

The force pushing at Uldyssian amplified. This time, his face smashed into the ground. A sharp pain exploded from the bridge of his nose and he had no doubt that it was broken, for blood already began dripping from the nostrils.

"Bind him," the cleric commanded. There was the scuffling of boots, Malic's servants rushing to obey. "We have no need of the others."

No need of the others...

With a pain-racked shout, Uldyssian forced himself up into a crouch. His head pounded and his heart strained, but a sense of triumph filled him. He found himself standing before two very startled Peace Warders. Before the pair could recover, the son of Diomedes reached out and seized both men by the throat.

His fingers barely wrapped across, yet the cracking of bone was very audible. The Peace Warders twitched, then collapsed at his feet, their necks broken by something other than mere strength.

Despite Uldyssian's resurgence, Malic appeared only mildly impressed. He glanced at the fire that had broken his mesmerism, then

looked again at Uldyssian. "This could have been handled with so much more pleasantry, my child. There is a place for you in the Temple. The Primus has sensed your power and would welcome you as a son..."

"I want nothing to do with either you or him!"

"A shortsighted choice, my child. The future of this land, of all lands, is the Temple of the Triune. Those who do not see the light shall fall forever in darkness..."

But darkness was all that Uldyssian saw when he looked at the high priest. There was that surrounding Malic that by no manner could the harried farmer link to any noble "light." In fact, Malic radiated a presence that repelled Uldyssian as nothing else ever had and he felt certain that it was the high priest's nearness that had earlier forced him to waking.

The Peace Warders had quickly regrouped and now surrounded the area. Serenthia stood near Mendeln, who seemed lost in thought. Uldyssian finally located Lylia near his left. She appeared as calm as Malic, but her calm evidently came from confidence in her lover. The noblewoman's face was filled with utter trust...trust in Uldyssian's ability to save them.

Strengthened by that, he looked from her to his brother and the trader's daughter before finally facing the cleric again. "I said I don't want anything to do with the Temple. Leave *now* or else."

"I truly regret the course you force me to, my child," Malic returned, glancing past his quarry. "That the others must *suffer* more than they need to because of your recalcitrance is so sad." The eyes narrowed dangerously. "So sad...and entirely your doing."

The Peace Warders moved. At the same time, several pieces of burning wood leapt out of the fire. They fell to the ground just before Uldyssian, where they immediately grew longer and thicker. Flames still surrounded them, but did not appear to burn them any longer.

Now several times their original size, the gathered sticks took on a new shape...a shape that mocked that of a man. Two lengthier branches for legs, two shorter ones for arms, and the knob of a broken piece acting as the head.

It stood as tall as the farmer, a stick figure from nightmare. The knob turned toward Malic.

"Take him," the cleric dispassionately ordered.

The fiery golem lunged at Uldyssian, its searing arms wrapping around his own in a hold worthy of a hangman's noose.

The heat was unbearable. The flames all but blinded him. He shut his eyes, but the light of the fire seemed to cut right through the lids. Uldyssian gasped for air, but all he received for his efforts was a

searing sensation throughout his lungs.

Yet, for all the agony, it should have been far worse. Uldyssian should have been burned to death by now, his flesh melted away and his bones blackened...

But Malic did not *want* him dead, Uldyssian slowly recalled. Malic wanted him pliable, a willing convert to bring before his master...the Primus. He might torture the farmer, might bring him to the edge of despair, but the high priest would not dare chance killing the one for whom he had been hunting.

That knowledge turned the struggle for Uldyssian. Doing his utmost to push the pain from his mind, he let out a defiant roar and tore himself free of the golem's grip.

There was a sudden, intense chill, followed by a great clatter. Uldyssian shook. As his eyesight cleared, it was to see a pile of smoldering sticks in front of him, all that remained of Malic's creation.

That was not all, though. As Uldyssian looked at his scorched arms, the burnt areas started *healing*. The skin quickly turned from a horrific black and crimson to a fresh pink unmarred by even a freckle. Even his garments no longer showed any sign of smoke, much less fire.

Uldyssian's pleasure at overcoming the high priest's latest trick faded as his fear for Lylia and the others once again overtook him. Unprotected, they could hardly have stood against the trained and bloodthirsty Peace Warders.

But all three were *untouched*. Warriors of the Triune did indeed surround them, but that was as much as the villains could manage. All else ended in futility. Uldyssian saw one blade come at his brother, only to bounce away several inches from its target. A Peace Warder sought to seize Achilios, only to nearly break his hands against the very air near the hunter's neck. The same was the case for Serenthia, whose gaze at that moment caught his own. *She* understood, even if her attackers did not. Eyes round, Cyrus's daughter nodded in acknowledgment to Uldyssian's power.

And as for Lylia...the noblewoman stood just behind him, also under a furious but futile onslaught of weapons by the zealous servants of the Temple. She stood in their midst, her expression one of calm, of expectation, and, as with Serenthia, Lylia looked at Uldyssian with the understanding that he would keep her from harm.

It was enough to make him smile despite the circumstances, and that smile remained in place as he focused his attention on the cause of their troubles.

For the first time, Malic no longer smiled or even acted disinterested. A frown cut across his face and in his dark, dark eyes Uldyssian read a barely held fury. The high priest held in his gloved

hands a small, jeweled box whose lid was turned so as to open toward his oafish adversary.

"You bring this upon yourself. The master will have you alive, if only it is your barely beating heart I present to him, my child."

He opened the box.

Uldyssian instinctively flinched...only to see that the box merely contained three glittering gems. Despite the flickering light of the campfire and the distance between the two men, Uldyssian was somehow able to identify them individually as a blue, oval stone, a gold, rectangular one, and—largest of all—a teardrop-shaped white diamond. The manner in which the gems were situated also indicated that there should have been a fourth, but that slot was empty.

"Do you think to bribe me into becoming a convert?" he finally asked, curious.

In answer, Malic ran a finger over each stone. "No. I think to make you *beg* me to let you."

Without warning, the Peace Warders abandoned their efforts, fleeing in the direction of the cleric. Malic paid them no mind, more interested in the open area between Uldyssian and him.

An area now filling with noxious smoke unlinked to the campfire... or any other source that could be seen.

Uldyssian had faced mesmerism, crushing force, and animated flame. He was not afraid of smoke. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward. Once he was through the smoke, it would be a short distance to the cleric's throat...

But from behind came an uncharacteristically shrill and worried cry from Lylia. "No, Uldyssian! Not like that! Beware the lurkers!"

No sooner had she called out than a macabre shape formed just before the farmer. Uldyssian caught glimpses of razorlike appendages above what passed for *three* arms and a bulbous head that looked too heavy to be supported by any natural body. Four glistening orbs burned a sinister ivory. The thing took a step toward Uldyssian—

And then, in the blink of an eye, a silver aura shone around the monstrous form. The creature raised its various appendages high and gave out a low, gasping sound...then simply *faded away*.

But even as Uldyssian was somehow relieved of that horrific adversary, two more shapes coalesced in the smoke, in their own ways more grotesque than the one that had just vanished. One was a thing whose body looked to have been freshly flayed, a body consisting of two legs ending in clawed hands and a sinewy, spiked tail attached to a tube-like body. There was no head, just a gaping hole atop, out of which nightmarish, toothy projections snatched at the air just before Uldyssian.

Its hellish companion was a skeletal figure with the face of a hungry bird of prey. Two leathery, vestigial wings thrust up from its shoulders. Its arms ended not in hands or claws, but in multiple suckers, and its legs were bent backward, like those of a grasshopper.

From somewhere farther back, somewhere beyond the smoke, Malic uttered a single word. "*Lucion.*"

The avian leapt forward with a swiftness unbelievable. One second, it stood before Uldyssian and the next it was upon him. Even as he fell under the force of its jump, he heard a deep grinding sound from the direction of the second beast.

The suckered appendages sought for the human's chest and throat and it was all Uldyssian could do to prevent them from reaching their targets. With his hands, he held the creature's horrific limbs by the wrist, shoving the upper part of the beast up as high as he could.

Above the sounds of the struggle, Malic almost nonchalantly commented, "They will keep enough of you left alive, my child, for the Primus to work with. Just enough."

Uldyssian tried to dismiss them the way he had the fire golem, but these were creatures more like the hunter in the forest. No, they were even more than that. Without understanding how, Uldyssian was certain that the fiend he had previously destroyed had been far inferior to these vicious horrors.

The long, sharp beak poised above Uldyssian's head. He expected the creature to snap at him or even try to spear him in the skull...but instead it opened wide and let out an ear-piercing shriek that rattled every bone in the farmer's body, a shriek without end or even respite.

It was all he could do just to keep from passing out under the intense onslaught. Ears pounding, Uldyssian finally released one of the avian's arms and went for the beak. However, as he did, the suckers dropped down across his chest.

A ghastly, gnawing sensation arose wherever the creature's suckers touched, but Uldyssian could not let that pain stop him any more than the previous. Straining, he seized the beak and, screaming himself, clamped it tightly shut. The avian shook its head, seeking release even as it continued to absorb what the human could only assume his life force.

Still feeling light-headed, Uldyssian attempted to shove his adversary off. Only then, though, did he realize that something now had hold of his feet, something that began dragging him...and the avian, in the process...toward where he last recalled the other demon to be.

Not at all wanting to know what horror the second creature offered, Uldyssian doubled his struggles, but could not free himself of his

initial foe. The force that had so far protected him well now failed utterly and he could only guess that it was because he was not used to wielding it for so long in such a desperate manner. Given time, Uldyssian had no doubt that he could have learned how to easily overcome either abomination, but that time was now not his.

He did not fear death, for, again, he knew that Malic wanted him alive, but the high priest no longer cared what condition Uldyssian was in otherwise. A ragged, bloody stump that still breathed apparently would suffice to please the mysterious and clearly not so compassionate Primus.

The avian's vampiric suckers began to have a debilitating effect. Uldyssian feared what would happen to the others if he failed. Lylia's trusting face in particular burned in his memory. They would all be slaughtered...if they had not already been. He had no idea if any of the three were still protected or, for that matter, what had happened to Achilios, who had never returned from his hunt. It was likely that the archer had been the first to die, slain by the Peace Warders while in the woods.

A numbness began to spread from his feet up, a chilling numbness that Uldyssian knew was not the result of what the avian was doing. So, both demons had him now. Surely he was done for.

"L-Lylia..." he murmured. "Lyl—"

His body suddenly shook, but not because of anything that his monstrous foes were doing. A tremendous, *glorious* strength filled the son of Diomedes. In an instant, he felt not only refreshed, but more powerful than *ever* before. The combined might of the two creatures seemed so utterly insignificant now. It made Uldyssian laugh that he had been so worried about being defeated by the likes of them.

Invigorated, Uldyssian tightened his grip on the first demon's beak. This time, though, he had no intention of merely trying to turn it to the side.

One squeeze was all it took to crush the beak. The demon let out a garbled sound and sought to rip itself free. Dark, green ichor flowed from its shattered maw, dripping all over Uldyssian. He ignored the burning caused by each rancid drop, eager to see what else he could do. The power surged through him like a roaring river, feeding him continuously. He felt his body swell. He was a giant in comparison to his foes, a titan.

A *god*, even...

Malic frowned as, not for the first time, he sensed something amiss. First there had been the nigh instantaneous attack by the fool just as

the demons had first been materializing. Uldyssian's destruction of the razorlike pyrioh, the most foul of the servants given into his service by the master, had stunned the high priest more than he had let on. He had not even sensed the farmer's power rise up, so immediate had been the results.

But the other two demons had acted according to his desires and had looked ready to make short work of the prey. Malic had kept his own heightened senses at their peak in order to make certain that the creatures did not get carried away—as demons were wont to do—and kill Uldyssian. Indeed, the high priest had almost been as much a part of the struggle as if he had been physically involved...and that was why he, too, noticed the astounding and impossible surge of power abruptly coursing through what, a breath before, had been a flailing, lost buffoon.

Noticed that surge...and could not comprehend just *how* it had come about. It almost seemed to Malic as if it had been fed to Uldyssian from another source...

Tearing himself from the struggle, he glanced at the three other figures. The cleric immediately dismissed Serenthia, who barely sensed the force growing within her, and the perplexed-looking fool, next to the girl, whom he had determined to be Uldyssian's brother. There *was* something peculiar about the brother, but he was not the source.

And then Malic looked at the only person left, the one he had taken at first to be the least of interest to him. He looked at her very close, seeing her as only one of his skill could.

Seeing something that he could never have guessed that he would see.

"Great Lucion!" he blurted, for once unable to maintain the appearance of complete confidence and disdain. One hand came up to point and the words of a spell formed on his lips—

A sharp pain struck him in the back next to the left shoulder blade. Well-versed in the human body and the various points of lingering or instant death, Malic's mind routinely calculated that if what had hit him—an arrow, he surmised—had gone an inch more to the center, then even his power might not have been enough to save him. As it was, he immediately set about using the gifts of his master to keep himself from not only bleeding to death, but passing out as well.

Unfortunately, that meant that he could no longer maintain control over the battle or deal with the other, shocking discovery. Malic teetered back, trying to maintain focus. As he turned, though, it was to witness Brother Rondo instead falling, the Peace Warder slain by a bolt through the throat. The cleric caught a glimpse of a lithe figure darting along the edge of campsite, a mere *archer* of all things. It

insulted Malic to think that he had come close to perishing because of someone without *any* skills in the art whatsoever.

Then, from where Uldyssian struggled, there came an odd and unsettling sound. Malic at first thought that perhaps one of his creatures, now rid of his control, had torn the farmer asunder. Instead, though, Uldyssian once more stood *free*. Worse, in his left hand he held the limp form of the beaked demon...but who now had no beak whatsoever. As the cleric watched, Uldyssian tossed aside the dead monster and used both hands to seize the third demon by its thick, sticky tongue. That tongue Malic had last seen wrapped around the fool's legs, there to inflict such cold as would have frozen most mortals solid in a heartbeat.

Yet, not only had Uldyssian survived that cold, but now he had dragged the last of Malic's infernal minions to him. The grinding teeth of the demon clamped down upon the farmer's wrists and for a moment the high priest thought that Uldyssian had made a fatal error.

Instead, the savage teeth *shattered* like brittle glass against the human's bare flesh.

Gritting his own teeth, Uldyssian pulled one hand free, then grabbed the gore-soaked pieces of beak from the first demon. Wielding the long, pointed fragments as he might a dagger, Uldyssian plunged them into the fleshy area just above his foe's monstrous maw.

The demon squealed...then dropped in an ungainly heap. Thick, black fluid coursed down over its body from the great wound.

As that happened, the arrow in Malic's back—forced by his will—popped free. The cleric felt the last of his wound seal shut. Some pain remained, but most of his weakness now came from the combination of his healing and his previous efforts to control the demons.

This was not how it was meant to be, Malic thought as he watched the finish of his final demon. The Primus would be enraged with him. The high priest shuddered at what form that fury might take. He particularly recalled witnessing the form his master's anger had taken against one of the previous high priests of another order. There had not been much left to dispose of afterward.

But what should have been a simple task was not. Malic still could not say where things had gone awry, but he could not help feel that there had been a piece in the game that not even the Primus had sensed, impossible as *that* should have been.

Uldyssian looked up at the cleric, and spreading across his sweat-soaked countenance was an expression that reminded Malic very much of the anger of which he had thought only the Primus capable.

Unmindful of his minions, Malic quickly sought to protect himself.

The force that struck him and his Peace Warders was a hundred

times greater than that which had earlier thrown the warriors. This time, bodies went flying as if shot from catapults. Men screamed as they collided with tree trunks or tumbled through the woods. One Peace Warder struck so hard that the oak's trunk cracked and the tree crashed into its neighbors.

Only Malic remained standing...if barely. He watched in disbelief as Uldyssian grimly strode toward him. There was blood in the farmer's eyes and the cleric knew that his would-be prey intended something far worse than anything unleashed so far.

And knowing that, Malic did the wisest thing he could.

The dust devil whirled to life just in front of Uldyssian, swiftly raising up whatever loose fragments of dirt and debris it could. The makeshift storm filled Uldyssian's face, momentarily blinding him.

The cleric concentrated...

Uldyssian swatted away at the thick cloud, angry at himself for having not expected something of the sort. Blinded, he prepared himself for the worst, certain that Malic had a second and far more insidious attack to follow.

But the dust settled almost immediately...revealing in its aftermath no sign of the high priest.

The son of Diomedes stood bewildered, awaiting some trick, yet Malic did not suddenly reappear and attack. Instead, slim hands took hold of him from behind and Lylia's voice declared, "You have done it, Uldyssian! You have saved us all from the cleric and his demons!"

He surveyed the scene around them, seeing only the corpses of the Peace Warders and the two abominations. At least three of the former lay with bolts through them, a sign that Uldyssian had not been entirely responsible for protecting the party. Achilios even now stood at Serenthia's side, giving comfort to the trader's daughter.

"Forgive her carelessness, my love," Lylia softly added. "She did not mean to endanger us."

Uldyssian wanted to go to Serenthia and explain that he understood that Malic had seized control of her mind, but decided to leave the situation in the hands of the hunter. Achilios would do everything he could to see to it that the distraught woman calmed down.

"You were amazing!" the noblewoman continued, breathless. "Do you see now, my love? Do you see that nothing is beyond you, that nothing can prevent you from achieving what we dream?"

He had seen everything, naturally, and was still awed himself by the abilities that he had displayed. A high cleric of the Triune had set spellwork, men, and monster against him and had failed. What more

could *anyone* fearing his existence do? Surely nothing...

But they *would* try...and the others, especially Lylia, would have to depend upon him until they, too, learned to fully awaken the force within them.

"Let them come," he muttered without realizing it. "Let *him* come," Uldyssian added, thinking of Malic.

Lydia came around to his side, her eyes glowing in the light of the campfire. "Uldyssian! Did you hear what the cleric said? Did you hear the name?"

"Name?" He tried to recall, but failed. "What name?"

Her lips drew close. "*Lucion*, he said. The cleric called out the name *Lucion* to the demons!" She turned her gaze to Mendeln, who was just approaching. Uldyssian's brother started. "You. You heard, did you not?"

Mendeln visibly paused to regroup his thoughts, then nodded. "Yes. I heard that name from him. I did, Uldyssian."

Lucion. The same name that the first demon had called out to before perishing. Now Malic had used it, too.

Was there some connection between the Temple and this Lucion? Between the *Primus* and this master of demons?

Uldyssian felt an intense uneasiness creep through him at the thought. Demons at the beck and call of the Temple. What did it mean?

And who, then, *was* the Primus, whose name might also be *Lucion*?

NINE

Malic screamed again...and again...and again...

He screamed even though no one else could hear him, not in the sanctum of his master. He screamed for a release from the agony, even though he knew none would come until the Primus chose...assuming that ever even happened. It was within the master's power to see to it that Malic's pain became eternal.

That fear fueled the high priest's screams anew.

Then, without warning, the pain ceased. With a gasp, Malic tumbled to the stone floor. The solidity of the floor amazed him, for he could have sworn that he had been floating in a sea of needles and flame.

"I could have sent a first-year novice in your place and achieved just as splendid results," came the Primus's voice. There was none of the gentle calm in it for which the elder cleric was known to his faithful. Malic, however, knew that chilling tone well. It had always been focused on others, though, *not* upon him.

And those upon whom it *had* been focused had, without exception, never left this chamber again.

"I am so disappointed in you," the Primus went on. "I had such high hopes for you, my Malic, such high hopes! Who has been my favorite for far longer than any other mortal?"

The question was not a rhetorical one, Malic knew. "I h-have, Great One..."

"Yes...yes, you have, my Malic. Your life has lasted double that of any human and in that time you have witnessed the premature passing of several others, you may recall..."

Now the high priest of the Order of Mefis truly expected his end to come. He looked up, determined to face his master at the last.

The Primus gazed down at his servant from his grand chair, silent so long that Malic began to shiver despite his attempt to seem confident even in the face of death or worse. When the master deliberated so, it was generally to devise something particularly horrific.

The scholarly figure rose and with measured steps joined his failed minion. The Primus viewed Malic as if debating something. For the first time since he had managed to cast himself back to the Grand

Temple, the high priest allowed himself a shadow of hope. Was he to be granted a reprieve?

"I have invested much in you, my Malic." The Primus's voice darkened further. Each syllable was venom, each word doom. The high priest hung his head again, certain that the sword would yet come down after all.

Instead, it was his master's hand, reaching for his own. Trembling, Malic extended his. The Primus guided him to his feet.

"I am *his* son, my Malic, and answer to *him* as you do to me! I will give you your life this once, for there is in my mind a question that even you could not understand, one that might have bearing on this creature called Uldyssian..."

"I am truly grateful, master! I live only to serve you! I swear!"

Still holding Malic's hand in his own, the Primus nodded. "Yes... you do...and to remind you of that, I give you a lasting gift."

The high priest screamed anew as his trapped appendage flared as if on fire. To his shock and dismay, it then twisted and curled, transforming. Gone was the soft flesh and sinew and in its place a thing warped and dripping green. Thick scales scored the limb well past the wrist. The fingers grew gnarled and clawed, the last two digits fusing together to become one.

The agony continued long after the spell had finished. The Primus would not let Malic drop to his knees. He made the cleric stand and face him, the master's gaze keeping the servant's prisoner.

"My mark is upon you now, my Malic...my mark and that of my father." The Primus finally released his grip. "Now and forever."

Malic shook but refused to fall. Weaving back and forth, he kept his gaze down and gasped, "G-Great is Lucion, all-powerful and all-knowing...and greater still is—is his father, the glorious and benevolent—" The human dared look up again. "*Mephisto!*"

Lucion smiled, his perfect teeth suddenly ending sharper, more pointed. His aspect became shadowed in a manner having nothing to do with light. Although it was but a glimpse of his true self, even still it was enough to make the high priest pale more than ever.

Then, as quickly as he had changed, the Primus once again looked his kindly part. He reached out and put his hand on Malic's shoulder. The cleric managed not to flinch.

"You have learned your lesson well, my Malic! That is why you remain my *favorite*. For the moment. Now, come! We will better pursue this matter below, I believe..."

"As you wish, Great One." Clutching his twisted, throbbing hand, Malic fell into place next to the Primus. He said nothing more, not wanting to revive his master's anger toward him.

He whose true name was Lucion, son of Mephisto, led Malic not to the doors of the sanctum, but to the wall behind his throne. As they approached, the Primus drew an arc in the air.

A blazing crimson arc formed on the wall. It quickly lengthened, the ends reaching the stone floor before Malic could draw a second breath. As they did, the area within faded away...revealing a torch-lit corridor that descended into the ground as if toward some ancient tomb. More sinister, the walls themselves were flanked by row upon row of stonelike guards whose fearsome armor did not in the least resemble that of the Peace Warders.

As Lucion and the high priest of Mefis entered the subterranean corridor, the grim guards cast their gazes toward them. Immediately the ranks came to attention. Within black helms shaped to resemble the skulls of hornless rams, black pits—not eyes—stared out. The warriors' flesh was the color of gravestones and their breastplates bore the emblem of their unholy calling, a bleeding skull transfixed upon twin swords entwined by serpents.

Malic knew their kind well—indeed, had chosen many for their ranks. Unlike their master, they did not frighten him, for their lot was to be led by the high priests in the name of the Primus on that day when the Temple would fully control Sanctuary and all pretense could be dropped.

Sanctuary. It was a name known only to a few, most of whom were not of mortal flesh. Malic had learned the truth about his world from his master, who was in a position to understand the reality better than most. After all, was he not the blood—if such a simplistic term could be used—of the Lord of Hatred, whom some would call a demon and who was, with his brothers Baal and Diablo, master of the Burning Hells?

The concepts of good and evil had long ago become unimportant to Malic save in their most scholarly senses. The high priest understood only power, and that which the Primus represented was the ultimate power in *all* creation. Had it not been the Three who had come together to form the realm of Sanctuary and people it with the products of their imagination? And had not they been tricked by one they thought an ally and cast out of Sanctuary for centuries? Yet, despite that treachery, they now had a foothold back in the world of their making and soon they would rip it free from the one who had stolen it. That cursed figure believed that he now had a kingdom all his own, its inhabitants his to play with as he chose. But he had underestimated the Three and, in Malic's august opinion, the son of one—Lucion—most of all.

It had been Lucion who had, after all this time, forced the betrayer to come out of hiding, to make his presence known to them. That was

the first step toward retaking Sanctuary and returning it to what it had been intended to be...a place from which those few worthy—such as himself—would be raised up to help the Three transform *all* existence into a reflection of their true glory.

And for those like Malic, that meant more power than the entirety of the mage clans and petty nobles combined.

What exactly the Primus sought of this Uldyssian in this regard, even the high priest did not fully understand. To Malic's mind, it was most likely that Uldyssian was to be the first of a new legion of warriors for the Three. What other use could there be? Malic saw the potential—had *felt* the potential—and so believed he was correct. His will properly broken, the farmer would readily succumb to Lord Lucion's will. He would then become a perfect servant, obeying all commands no matter how dreadful.

Just like the morlu, the cleric thought.

As if to reinforce that last thought, the corridor finally came to an end. A shimmering veil of poison green that Malic knew well confronted the pair.

Again, the son of Mephisto gestured. The veil faded to so much smoke, and dissipated...and, with a sudden, jarring clash of metal against metal, the lair of the morlu lay revealed.

This was the name that Lucion had given his ram-masked soldiers. The morlu. It was a word of power, two syllables steeped in the magic of the Primus's sire. The morlu were more than just fanatical; they lived and breathed the desire of the Lord of Hatred. They did not sleep, anymore; they did not eat. All the morlu did was *fight*.

And as Malic and his master entered the vast, bowl-shaped chamber dug well beneath the grand temple, they came upon the morlu indeed doing just that. Illuminated by thick, scalding rivers of molten earth flowing randomly through the huge cavern, the scene was one out of a nightmare worthy of a demon. A tremendous sea of armored figures hacked and slashed and sliced and thrust away one another with utter abandon and absolute glee. Every warrior bled from scores of deep ravines across their bodies. Limbs lay strewn upon the ichor-soaked rock floor. Corpses by the scores littered the vicinity for as far as the eye could see. Malic beheld heads lolling far from torsos, the mouths—if the jaws were yet attached—still open in their death screams. Many of the faces lacked an eye or two or a nose or ear and they looked not at all different from most of the living, who, though likewise maimed and disfigured, were so caught up in the battle that they paid their wounds no mind. Bits of other body parts floated or lay on the banks of the lava rivers and each breath more were added by the zealous combatants.

A quick study of the scene below revealed that there was neither

rhyme nor reason to the struggle, no identifiable sides in the conflict. The morlu did not have such. Every warrior fought for himself, siding with his brethren only long enough to accomplish some common goal...at which point they tended to turn upon one another. They cheerfully slew one another with the same titanic effort with which they would have any outside foe. Only against such were they truly united, for that was what their lord desired most of them. They were to be a plague that would strike down those who would not be converted, who very likely served the betrayer, be it willingly or as a dupe.

Lucion glanced up at the ceiling, although Malic knew well that the mighty figure was not at all interested in the rock formations there. The Primus looked beyond mortal sight into a place that all the training in the world could not reveal to the high priest or any other mere human.

"We have timed our visit well. The hour is nigh, my Malic," murmured the Primus with something approaching the fondness a proud father might have for his children. "Let us pause and savor the beauty of it all as it refreshes itself..."

Turning his eyes back to the cataclysmic sight below, Lord Lucion gestured toward the very center, where the worst of the carnage had and was still taking place. In the midst of everything, a black gemstone nearly as large as a man sat embedded in a triangular column of red-streaked marble. "Blood marble," it was named, naturally. The stone was called by Malic's master the Kiss of Mephisto, although the cleric had, from past comments, reason to believe that it had once been named for another of whom Lord Lucion would not speak.

"Behold, my Malic..."

As if time itself ceased, every morlu warrior abruptly froze where he was. Blades paused halfway into guts. Severed heads halted in their tumble from the ruined necks. Utter silence reigned over the humongous lair.

The Kiss of Mephisto let out a burst of black light. Not darkness, but completely, utterly black *light*.

And as that light rushed over both the fighting and the fallen, they twisted and turned as if their bones had become fluid. Lost limbs flew up to reattach, gaping wounds sewed together. Mangled corpses shivered with renewed animation. Malic felt a twinge of remembrance concerning his own recent change and clutched his disfigured hand anew as he watched events unfold.

The ranks of the morlu reconstituted themselves. Even from the steaming, red depths of the magma rivers, the warriors emerged resurrected. Their armor momentarily glowed bright from the searing

heat in which their corpses had bathed, then faded to the dour black.

It was a miraculous sight to Malic, this raising of the dead and healing of the wounded, even though he knew that in some sense it was not what it appeared. The stone did *not* have the ability to bring life back to the mortal remains. Those morlu who had been slain either this day or previous were not, in fact, even human anymore. Rather, they were cadavers animated by Mephisto's foul majesty through the will of his son, Lucion. What existed within was a demonic essence that mimicked the life that had once existed. Every new morlu warrior quickly joined the ranks of the animated—so harsh was the constant battling—but they thought this an honor, believing that their souls were somehow still a part of all this.

But what truly happened to those souls, only the Lord of Hatred surely knew, or so Malic at least thought.

Within moments, the field was again filled with restless fighters in their prime. Several growled at one another or brandished swords, maces, axes, and the like at potential foes. The blood that had covered much of the area had faded into the rock. To all apparent purposes, it was as if the battle had never taken place.

"Damos..." Lord Lucion whispered.

From far off in the cavern, from deep within the ranks, a particularly large and grotesque morlu turned and peered up at the pair. He suddenly raised his massive sword and gave a guttural cry, a salute, to his master.

The Primus nodded, then raised one hand with all fingers spread wide. Damos nodded and began barging through the rows of heaving bodies. Without warning, he seized one by the collar and dragged him from his position. That morlu followed behind Damos as the Primus's chosen commander sought another. In this manner, five soon followed Damos up the edge toward where Lucion and Malic awaited them.

"Great master..." Damos croaked as he bent down on one knee. His voice was akin to that of every other morlu who had been slain once. It was as if, despite its best effort, the dark essence within could not completely mask itself as human. Damos's voice could never have passed for mortal.

Behind the lead morlu, the five others also knelt. Lucion touched Damos on the top of the ram helm, giving his blessing. Damos then turned his head toward Malic. "High priest..."

Malic repeated his master's gesture.

"Rise, Damos," commanded Mephisto's son. When the lead morlu had obeyed, the Primus said, "You are at the high priest's command. You will obey him in all things."

"Yes, Great One..."

“There are prey of both life and death involved, Damos. You understand the difference.”

The helmed figure nodded. Malic knew Damos from past need. The helm only partially obscured a face that looked as if the Kiss of Mephisto had failed to completely remake it. Not much remained of the nose save two gaping holes, and Damos’s lower jaw seemed to have belonged to another, even larger creature, perhaps a bear. The pits that had once been eyes were misaligned. However, other than the fact that his eyes were no more, Damos looked very much as he had when first being initiated into the *living* ranks of new morlu. He had been one particularly ugly human inside and out and his dark soul even then had disproven the adage of not judging a book by its cover. Indeed, there was little difference now between the mortal Damos and the thing currently inhabiting his shell.

“The high priest will mark the one to salvage, the others to slay,” continued Lucion. Then, to Malic’s surprise, the demon lord added, “but you will also have to be on your guard for another.”

“Another?” blurted the cleric, suddenly recalling some of what he had blathered to his lord in defense of his failure as the Primus had punished him.

There came an edge to the Primus’s voice that Malic had never noted in all the years that he had served the great one. Almost it sounded like...*uncertainty*? But *no*, the human quickly decided, that could not be. Lucion was *never* uncertain.

Never...

“I have sensed...” the son of Mephisto said after an equally unsettling silence. “...that all is not as it appears on the surface. There is some intrusion, some...other...” He trailed off, suddenly caught up in thought.

The morlu stirred uneasily and Malic grew more perturbed. This was not how the master acted. He never paused so, never hesitated.

What was happening? *Who* was this other?

Malic again recalled his own suspicions during the debacle against the farmer. He had been overwhelmed by the incredible power wielded by the simplistic Uldyssian, power combined with skill that the fool should not have had. The high priest had wondered then if there was something else going on behind the scenes, that things were not as they had appeared.

And now...and now Malic suspected that Lord Lucion thought the same. Lord Lucion, it seemed, *believed* his tale.

Mephisto’s son shook his head, his expression darkening monstrously. “No...it could never be.” The expression passed away, leaving in its place the look of utter assurance to which Malic was

more used. "You will know it," the Primus went on suddenly and calmly to both the cleric and Damos. "This time, you will know it. It must be obliterated. The farmer—this Uldyssian ul-Diomed—must be preserved, but *it* and all else around him shall be no more. Is that understood?"

The lead morlu bowed his head in acknowledgment. Malic nodded, his human hand still clutching the transformed one.

Lucion noted his action. Smiling benevolently, he said to the human, "It is a gift I give you, my Malic. You will see. You will see..."

The pronouncement encouraged the high priest. Malic eyed the macabre appendage anew. His master did nothing without thought. An actual *gift*, after all? He could flex the digits as easily as he could the old ones and in some cases in manners not previously possible. The pain had finally begun to subside, too. Curiously, the cleric also felt stronger than he had.

Steepling his fingers, the son of Mephisto concluded, "Now it is time to seek anew the one called Uldyssian. I will in this brook no failure; is that understood?"

Again, there was mute acknowledgment from both Malic and Damos.

"Then that is all. You will depart immediately."

The chosen morlu gathered behind Malic, who bowed to the master. Eagerness had replaced fear in the heart of the cleric. He silently swore that he would bring Uldyssian ul-Diomed to Lord Lucion even if it meant beating the farmer until there remained just enough spark of life for the Primus to use.

As he led Damos and the other five away, Malic also thought about this other intrusion of which his master had spoken. Despite whatever power it wielded, Lord Lucion wanted nothing of it. He wanted it destroyed, not preserved. It very much felt to the high priest as if his master *did* know what—or *who*—it was.

Malic was not the type to betray his master. No such fool was *he*. However, it would certainly do no harm to find out just *what* this other thing was. Then, once his curiosity was satisfied, he could let the morlu destroy it.

All that mattered was the fool of a farmer...

Lucion did not watch Malic depart. He knew that he could trust the cleric to obey this time. The mortal had no other choice.

The legions of morlu continued to chafe at the bit, but Lucion let them wait. He had not told his servants all, not given them true indication of his thoughts.

It cannot be, he argued with himself. *It cannot be...her. She cannot be here...*

And that made him think of the other, of the one with whom he played this game of control of the minds and souls of mortals. The one was as little like them as he was. Could it be that his foe had some part in this? Was this all a ploy to put Lucion and his father off balance? That certainly made more sense than the possibility that *she* was here.

He would not tell his father just yet. As Malic rightly feared punishment by the Primus, so, too, did Lucion fear the wrath of his sire. His own monstrous nature paled in comparison to that of the Lord of Hatred. No, for now, Mephisto would not be told.

But if it *was* her...then sooner or later Lucion would have to confront his father.

I must find out more. What he had not told Malic was that, live or die when next he confronted the farmer, the cleric would reveal to Lucion the truth about this second force using the human to shield it from his presence. Malic was bound by his new hand to his master more than he knew. There were abilities to the hand that could destroy even *her*...at the cost of his human vessel, of course. Lucion found Malic particularly useful, but his loss would mean little if it meant securing Sanctuary, especially from her.

Trying to ease his mind, the Primus nodded at the waiting warriors below.

With a collected cry, the morlu went at each other again. Metal rang out against metal. A hundred warriors were slaughtered in the first breath. Blood splattered the floor of the vast chamber and the cries of the wounded echoed, the last being music to the ears of their master.

Yet, despite reveling in the endless carnage created by his eager servants, Lucion's thoughts continually rebelled by returning to the previous subject. It could *not* be her; it could *never* be her. She was gone, either banished forever or dead. It was not within even her power to overcome either. He knew her well enough, did he not? Had he not once been as close to her as nearly any other? Only two had possibly known her better than Lucion, and one of those was his father.

The other was his adversary...who had been the reason for her downfall.

Which brought to prominence again the question that Lucion would have liked to know the answer to.

If this is not some plan of his...does he sense her possible return, too?

TEN

There was no disagreement when Uldyssian decided that the party could not stay where they had been camped. Serenthia wanted to at least gather the bodies of the Peace Warders together for some sort of respectful burial, but Uldyssian cared nothing for the corpses. These men had intended capture for him and death for his companions and so he felt justified in leaving them out in the open to be feasted upon by the carrion eaters of the forest.

They searched for the Peace Warders' mounts, but, oddly, there was no trace of the animals. No one could recall when last any of them had been seen and even the sharp-eyed Achilios could find no trail. They quickly gave up and, mounting their own for steeds, raced off into the dead of night.

Uldyssian remained tense throughout the ride, not because he feared for himself so much, but for the others...especially Lylia. Malic had surely noted her closeness to the farmer and the high priest would no doubt seek to take advantage of their relationship even more so than the blood ties between Uldyssian and his brother.

Thinking of Mendeln, Uldyssian glanced back at his sibling's shadowed form. What little he could make out of Mendeln's countenance revealed the same anxiousness the older brother had noticed before. Mendeln appeared particularly struck by the carnage, even more than Serenthia. Uldyssian had caught him standing near one body after another, shaking his head and reaching out into the darkness. The shock of the incident clearly continued to haunt Mendeln even now...

With a grunt, Uldyssian returned his gaze to the black path ahead. Perhaps it would be better to leave Mendeln somewhere along the way. He wished no harm to come to his brother nor did he want Mendeln's fragile state to cause any difficulty for him later on. Uldyssian had always known his brother was not as strong physically as him, but he had believed Mendeln of a sturdy mind. Evidentially, he had been wrong.

He took another glance over his shoulder. Yes, Mendeln looked like a man haunted. Something would have to be done if that did not change...

Faster and faster they rode, racing like the wind through the shrouded night. Mendeln tried desperately to stare only ahead, but even in that direction he could not entirely escape *them*.

They were five, he, his brother, and the rest. That was all that there should have been. Five people, four steeds.

But with the five there now traveled nearly a *score* more riders that only Mendeln could apparently see.

The translucent wisps of white and gray fluttered along each side of the party. They shimmered in and out of existence. They had gaunt, pale faces and wore the helms and breastplates of Peace Warders. When he did dare glance in their direction, it was to be rewarded with the same unblinking, hollow-eyed stares, as if the ethereal figures awaited some word from him.

But Mendeln had no words for these ghosts of the men his brother and Achilios had slain, no words save a silent plea for the shades to depart. Yet, not only did they not leave, it seemed to Mendeln that they clustered nearest to *him*. The phantasms kept perfect pace with the anguished farmer, riding astride invisible mounts. Mendeln supposed that if any of the animals had been killed in the process, then they, too, would have joined the ghostly charge. That notion made him chuckle nervously, which brought a concerned glance from nearby Achilios.

He thought of telling the archer what was happening, Achilios perhaps the only one who might understand. The hunter would recall the unsettling stone and would make the connection just as Mendeln had.

But if Achilios had any good sense—which Mendeln believed he did—then the blond archer would immediately keep his distance from the hapless farmer. Mendeln certainly would not blame him. He wanted to be as far away from himself as possible. However, since it was not possible to do that, all he could hope was that, with time, the shades would go to whatever rest they were supposed to go.

Yes, he could *hope* that would happen...but Mendeln *doubted* he would be so lucky as that.

Night gave way to a mist-covered day, but although Achilios suggested that they stop, Uldyssian chose to press the horses and his companions until what he believed nearly noon. Only when they came across a stream surrounded by high, canopied trees did he finally call a halt.

Even Uldyssian felt weary by this point. Dismounting, he immediately went to help Lylia down. Achilios did the same for

Serenthia. Mendeln slipped off his own mount and rushed to the stream to drink.

However, barely had Uldyssian's brother started to thrust a hand toward the clear water when suddenly he withdrew it as if bitten. The younger son of Diomedes stared off into the distance, then, blinking, looked back to the rest.

"This water is tainted," he said somewhat hesitantly. "Best not to drink it. At the very least, we would become very ill."

"How do you know?" asked Serenthia.

Mendeln frowned, acting to Uldyssian like a child caught in a lie. "I saw...I saw some small fish...more than one...float by. They were dead and mottled. Looked like they died of sickness."

"I've seen the like," interjected Achilios. "If what Mendeln describes is accurate, then we'd be best not to drink."

"But there is nothing to fear," declared Lylia, stepping from Uldyssian's side. She looked up at him. "You can surely deal with something so simple as this."

"Deal with it?"

"Make the water *pure*, naturally!"

The others eyed her in disbelief. Even Uldyssian had some trouble with what she said, but the longer she held his gaze, the more he considered the possibility.

"All right." He strode to the stream, glancing only briefly at his brother. Mendeln put out a warning hand, but Uldyssian sensed Lylia watching and so continued past his brother without a word. He could do this for her, he decided. Each time, it had been her confidence, her love, that had shown him the way. This would be no different.

His fingers touched the water. Droplets fluttered over his hand as he concentrated, willing the stream to be clean of taint. Uldyssian repeated the desire over and over in his head until finally deciding that either he had succeeded or it had all been a waste of time.

As he drew back his hand, Serenthia asked, "But, how will we know if it worked?"

Once again, Lylia proved her faith in Uldyssian. Without hesitation, she slipped past him and knelt by the stream.

This was too much even for Uldyssian. "Lylia! No—"

But in one swift motion, she brought her cupped hands to her lips and drank fully the contents.

Uldyssian stood ready to help her, fearful that he had failed this time and thus risked the life of the one most dear to him. To his surprise, though, it was Mendeln who sought to ease his concern.

"The stream...Uldyssian...the stream...is clear of taint now. No need to worry, I swear, brother..."

Uldyssian did not ask how Mendeln knew this. Yet, something in his sibling's voice made him believe.

"He speaks the truth," the noblewoman declared. "I am all right, my love. Trust me."

He seized Lylia, holding her tight. "Don't ever do that again!" he breathed in her ear. "Especially not because of me..."

"But I knew that your power protected me...protected all of us. Was I not correct?"

"Just...don't..."

"Well, I for one, need a drink after that," Achilios uttered loudly, leading the horses forward. "As do these fine creatures..."

His action brought normalcy back to the party. Uldyssian and the rest moved upstream of the animals and began to take their fill. Achilios took care of the horses, then joined the others.

But as he rose from satiating his thirst, the archer suddenly looked past the stream, clearly staring at something in particular. Uldyssian peered after him, but saw nothing.

"I'll be back shortly," Achilios muttered...then the hunter darted across the stream, vanishing a moment later among the trees.

Serenthia stepped up next to Uldyssian. "Should we go after him?"

The farmer knew his friend too well. Even he would have been hard-pressed to keep pace with Achilios when it came to seeking some prey in the woods. "Likely he just saw some rabbit or something he wants to bring back for our dinner. Nothing to worry about. You heard him. He'll be just fine."

But it was a tense several minutes that passed before Achilios finally reappeared. Despite the fact that surely he had run a good pace, the hunter was not at all winded. His expression, though, was anything but pleasant.

"There's a town nearby, barely an hour's pace on foot, much less that by horse."

Lylia, who had been sitting on a rock, leapt to her feet. "A *town*? That is not possible!"

Achilios cocked his head as he glanced at the distraught noblewoman. "Not only is it possible, milady, but it's *Partha*."

Now, everyone else's expression mirrored that of Lylia.

"How can that be?" blurted Mendeln. "We did not ride that direction!"

"I *know* that...but it's definitely Partha. I spoke to one of the young locals."

At least one thing now began to make sense to Uldyssian. "Is that the reason you ran off?"

"Aye. I saw a bit of movement and didn't want to take the chance

of losing him. Thought it was a bandit, but it was only a boy...Cedric, he said his name was. He was out trying to hunt." For the first time since his return, Achilios allowed himself a brief smile. "And he's not bad. Took me a bit to keep on his trail. The boy's light-footed."

Paying the archer's judgment of the boy's skills no mind, Uldyssian tried to determine just how the band could have possibly come around in what was nearly a circle at this point. Partha should have been far, far behind them by now.

"Malic..." he finally muttered. As the others looked to him, Uldyssian said, "Don't you see? It has to be the high priest! This smells of some spell! Who else could it be?"

Lylia joined his cause. "Yes, surely him! And knowing that, we must certainly *not* fall into his trap by going to the town! We must flee from its vicinity immediately!"

"But Cedric hardly seems the cleric's tool," argued Achilios. "And the people of Partha have the reputation of being good and fair folks —"

"It matters not what the people are like," she insisted in turn. "They will be pawns for him to use against Uldyssian; that is what we need to keep in mind."

Somewhat to the surprise of Uldyssian, Serenthia supported the other woman. "She's right, Achilios. There's nothing natural about this turn. Malic must intend something awful."

He looked to his brother, but Mendeln was conspicuously mute on the subject. Curiously, rather than be of a mind to follow Lylia's sound advice and leave the likely trap behind, Uldyssian found himself *eager* to enter Partha. If Malic hoped to surprise him there, he would find his supposed quarry more than willing to finish their previous encounter.

"We go to Partha."

His declaration was met with a variety of expressions, Achilios's most eager, Lylia's most damning. A fire such as Uldyssian had never witnessed burned in her eyes. However, it lasted but a breath before the noblewoman caught herself. Trembling, she exhaled, then nodded.

"To Partha," Lylia agreed, finally smiling. "To the edge of an abyss and beyond, so long as with you, my love."

He was grateful for her change of heart. Her anger had only been fear for him, Uldyssian surmised. After all, it was he whom Malic desired to capture.

But it was she and the others whom the high cleric seemed to think expendable. Uldyssian would make certain that, should Malic strike, they were again protected. He could do no less since it was because of him that they would also ride into potential danger.

With Achilios taking the lead, the five rode toward the town. As the hunter had indicated, the party had stopped just beyond sight of Partha. Indeed, it took them less than the hour Achilios had suggested to reach the edge of town.

Partha was much larger than Seram or even Tulisam. For the first time in his life, Uldyssian beheld buildings four stories high, dwarfing even the barns of the wealthiest of his neighbors. Their stone and wood exteriors had been smoothed over with plaster to give them an extravagant look. Roofs were arched and made of wood tiles overlapping one another. The streets—

The streets were made of stone, not mud. Wagons and horses clattered along their way, raising a racket akin to thunder. There were more people in Partha than Uldyssian had probably seen in all his life and many were dressed in outfits that made him feel like a beggar. In fact, of all five of them, only Lylia looked at all appropriate to be seen by the inhabitants.

Someone called out to them. Aware that none of them had ever been to Partha, Uldyssian stiffened in the saddle. However, it was no trap, but rather a youth who ran directly up to the side of Achilios's steed.

"Ho, there, Cedric!" the hunter called down. He tousled the boy's mop of hair. "I told you we'd be along soon!"

"An' I called Father, I did!" Cedric returned breathlessly.

Sure enough, behind the lad came an august gentleman at least a decade older than Uldyssian and dressed in flowing brown and black robes that immediately stirred distrust in the farmer. Was Cedric's father a cleric of some sort?

"Calm yourself," Achilios quickly said. "'Tis a trader much like Cyrus. Probably even knew him, in fact, if the boy was correct."

"This them, Ced?" asked the would-be hunter's parent. The steely-jawed figure swept back silver and black shoulder-length hair and studied the newcomers. His eyes paused on Lylia, but froze on Serenthia.

"I know you, though you be all grown up! You'd be Cyrus's little girl...Sara, was it?"

"Serenthia," she responded, her face becoming overcast.

Cedric's father immediately noted this. His tone more formal, he said, "I am sorry, lass. I shall not ask you about it."

A silent Serenthia nodded gratefully.

Other townsfolk had begun to pause in the vicinity, curious about the new arrivals. Part of that curiosity clearly had to do with the man greeting them, whose status in Partha was surely prominent.

"Friends, my name is Ethon ul-Garal, and although I regret the

passing of my old comrade, I heartily welcome those of kin and companionship to him.”

Uldyssian eyed Achilios. “They both seem very certain that we were coming.”

“I took a chance that you’d say yes, that was all. When Cedric mentioned that his father was an important merchant, I used Cyrus’s name—my apologies for that, Serry—because I recalled how he seemed to know everyone in the region who shared his trade. Cedric said that he would run and tell his father about us and tell him what I said about the old man—”

“Many’s a good hagggle I had with Cyrus,” threw in Master Ethon, eyes twinkling at old memories.

“Anyway, after our path led us so near, I figured Destiny wants us here.”

“*Malic* wants us here, Achilios. Remember that.”

“My friend,” called the merchant, clearly seeking to prevent an argument between the two. “Is there something wrong?”

“Nothing that can be spoken of here,” Uldyssian remarked in a low voice. “It’d be best if we spoke in private, Master Ethon. Your headman should also hear.”

“As I am also elected leader of Partha, that shall be a simple matter to deal with! But come! Who do I have the pleasure of meeting? I knew dear Serenthia as a child and there is no mistaking her beauty even now. You—” He gestured at Uldyssian. “—have a vague familiarity about you, too, but the others do not.” Ethon’s eyes again lingered over Lylia. “Some, especially not, and I am known for my memory for faces.”

“I am Uldyssian ul-Diomed—”

“Ah! Diomedes of Seram! A strong-hearted, outspoken man of the earth! You look his part, too. You’d be his firstborn, if I’m not mistaken.”

Acknowledging the older man’s excellent memory, Uldyssian introduced Mendeln and Achilios, then, grudgingly, Lylia. He expected the merchant to fawn over her, but Master Ethon merely bowed and said, “By the garments and the face, you would be from the north of the great city, yes?”

She dipped her head in turn. “Yes.”

Cedric’s father clearly expected more of an answer, but when Lylia remained quiet, he took it in as much stride as he had Serenthia’s silence. Instead, he looked to the group as a whole. “Well, now that we are friends, you shall come with me to my humble home!”

At first, Uldyssian wanted to turn Ethon’s offer down. The man meant well, but this was not a social visit. Yet, if he was both its most

prominent citizen and its leader, then there was no one better to warn concerning any possible threat to his people.

Uldyssian only hoped that Cyrus's old friend would not throw his daughter and the rest into a cell once he learned the truth. After all, it was they who brought the danger, in a sense.

As Ethon was on foot, the party dismounted, then led their horses after him. Uldyssian noted that the populace now treated the five as if they were visiting dignitaries, bowing as they passed. Master Ethon was clearly a man highly respected not only for his position but for himself.

That the man had come without a personal guard bothered Uldyssian. Were the people of Partha *that* trusting? Or was there something more sinister involved? If this was Malic's doing, it was a very convoluted trap. Uldyssian could see neither rhyme nor reason to it. These seemed *good* people, honest people. In addition to bowing, many of them also nodded pleasantly at the group. Some of those behind the party had already begun returning to their own tasks, clearly not at all suspicious of the strangers.

"I have not been in Seram for many years," announced Ethon to his guests as they walked through the busy streets. "How fares it? It was always a tranquil stop. I admit I used to go there in part because I savored the peaceful nature of it as much as the heated bargaining with Master Cyrus!"

"There was a fierce storm there recently," Mendeln interjected. Uldyssian quickly glanced at his brother, but saw that Mendeln intended no further comment.

"Indeed? I suppose that would be the most exciting thing to happen in Seram, lucky for you! I love Partha, but there are so many, many matters on which to keep a careful eye, you know. At times, I would have gladly exchanged places with your father, Mistress Serenthia."

Uldyssian decided to check something. "And do the clerics of the Temple and the Cathedral offer any help with guiding your efforts here?"

"Them?" Looking over his shoulder at Uldyssian, the merchant chuckled. "Hasn't been a blessed one of them in Partha for over a year. They've nothing we want. We're quite satisfied with our lot. They can save their words for someone who wants to hear them, if you'll pardon me for saying so."

Uldyssian nodded in appreciation, Master Ethon's words verifying what he had so far noted about Partha and its inhabitants. He saw robust men and women cheerfully going about their chores or taking a break to eat or converse with friends. He saw clean streets of stone and well-kept structures of both wood and rock. There was no one

who was not dressed neatly, whether in simple robes or in more elegant garments. It was a good town with good people.

That was not to say that all was perfection in Partha. There were infirm and maimed among the inhabitants. An elder with barely a tooth remaining hobbled along on one leg and a crutch. Uldyssian also saw a young boy whose left arm was a shriveled version of his right, clearly a defect at birth. Another man with the look of the farmer that the son of Diomedes knew so well from his own face bore savage scars across his arms and neck from what had likely been some accident.

None of them appeared to be shunned by their neighbors and, in fact, all had companions assisting them. Partha under Ethon was evidently a very tolerant town, something even Seram could have learned from them.

He looked again at the child. The poor limb reminded him of his youngest sister, Ameli. In her case, the right arm had been of proper length, but it had been bent back and had always been as thin as a piece of straw. Yet, Ameli had been the most cheerful of the family, the most wanting to help—

The boy passed out of sight. Uldyssian gritted his teeth at the bitter memory. Men like Malic walked the earth living as lords while children suffered because of either chance or some capricious spirit, perhaps—

He stopped in his tracks. “Mendeln.”

His brother hesitated. “What is it?”

“Here.” The older brother thrust the reins of his animal into Mendeln’s hand, then whirled back in the direction from which they had come.

Unaware of what was taking place behind him, Master Ethon started pointing out some of Partha’s landmarks. “It may interest you to look upon that crested building yonder...”

Lylia said nothing as he passed, but Uldyssian caught a smile of understanding. Serenthia and Achilios barely had the chance to register him before he was far behind the party.

Making the best of his height, Uldyssian looked among the locals. Most paid him no mind, but a few watched the stranger with mild interest.

Uldyssian grew frustrated as the object of his search evaded him. He tried to recall just where he had last seen—

There! Heart pounding, the son of Diomedes pushed past a startled shopkeeper in the midst of arranging his wares. Ahead stood a woman he recognized from earlier.

As he neared, she turned. Next to her, the young boy with a ruined arm followed suit.

Now ignoring the woman, Uldyssian knelt down in front of the child. "May I see your arm...please?"

With the innocence of his age, the boy stretched it forward as far as it could go. However, his mother naturally looked concerned and pulled him back out of the newcomer's reach.

Uldyssian glanced up at her. "Please. I mean no harm. My sister was like this. I won't harm him. Just let me study it for a moment."

She had no reason to do as he asked, yet, the woman's expression softened and, with a nod, she allowed Uldyssian to examine the arm.

His fingers gently probed the limb. Up close, he saw that it was in even worse condition than his sister's had been. Thinking of Ameli again brought a sudden rush of emotion to Uldyssian that only at the last did he understand had been bottled up inside him for those many years. Tears drowned out his vision. He wished that he could have done more for his sister...for his *entire* family. With all the power that he seemed to wield now, he could have perhaps saved *some* of them from the monstrous wasting disease...

Tears drenched his face. Without realizing it, he kept his hold on the boy's withered limb. To Uldyssian, though, it was as if time had turned backward and he now clutched Ameli's arm. She, of all of the family, had been most mistreated by life. First being born so, then dying before she could even have had much of a chance to experience *anything*.

His mind filled with images of his lost sister, but with one difference. She had a healthy body now. Two healthy arms. He imagined her catching things or, better yet, hugging him tight.

Only belatedly did Uldyssian sense that someone *was* hugging him. That brought him back to the present...where he realized it was the young boy.

With *two* good arms...

Uldyssian looked past the child to his mother. She, in turn, stared at him with an expression of disbelief. Tears ran down her cheeks. Behind her, several other townsfolk had gathered, they, too, eyeing the farmer with astonishment.

Disengaging himself from the child, Uldyssian looked at the people surrounding him. Harsh visions of the reactions in Seram haunted him and he stepped back in concern. "I didn't mean—I didn't meant to—"

But he *had* meant to. He had noticed the child and had been filled with the sudden desire to see if he could do for the boy what had not been possible for Ameli. As it turned out, Uldyssian had been able to do just what he had hoped.

And now, Partha, too, would turn on him, call him a sorcerer or worse...

The boy's mother lunged at him...and covered the stunned farmer with kisses and hugs. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Beyond her, one man in the forefront of the growing throng bowed. Another followed suit, then another, and another, and another...

Someone then chose to go down on one knee. That became the impetus for the rest to do the same. Within moments, everyone around Uldyssian knelt before him as if he were a king.

Or more...

ELEVEN

Clad in floor-length robes of white, their heads lifted high, the six golden-skinned young women sang his praises as he lounged on the down couch in his private chambers. Although none were related or even physically looked like one another, there was that in their fanatic expressions that somehow made them all still seem identical.

Their adoration for him was absolute and each would have gladly accepted his advances...not that such would ever happen. That they were beautiful meant nothing to him save that they were as the vast murals on the walls and ceiling or the intricate vases standing atop the crested marble stands. They were part of an overall design, one to help him relive, in some minute—*very* minute—way, the wondrous past that he had willingly left far behind.

The Prophet's luminous silver-blue eyes gazed up at the masterfully-painted images of ethereal winged figures fluttering through the sky. The artisan had been excellent by most standards, but he could never have understood the true depth of what his patron desired. Still, the results of his long labor let the Prophet imagine a little of what had been...and of what he had forsaken.

He barely looked old enough to be called a man, though looks could be and were most definitely deceiving. His ivory skin was unmarred by even the least stubble and his golden locks flowed well past his shoulders. The Prophet was lithe and very fit, although not overly muscular like the Inquisitor guards standing at attention outside his sanctum doors. He was, by the opinion of all who had seen him, simply *perfect*.

He wore a look of innocent contemplation, yet tonight he was anything but serene. The impossible had come to pass and he would not stand for it. He was too close to achieving his desires, too close to re-creating the paradise he had lost.

Near the area of his repose, four senior clerics clad in the collared silver-white robes of their station knelt with heads down in prayer. Each man looked old enough to be his father or even grandfather, yet, just like the women, they treated *him* with the utmost veneration.

The Prophet suddenly found the many voices annoying to his ears. He raised one hand and the singing ceased. The praying stopped a moment later as the clerics became aware of the shift in mood.

"I must compose myself before the next sermon," the Prophet

declared, his own voice flowing like the music of a lyre.

The singers filed dutifully out of the chamber, followed immediately by the clerics.

The Prophet waited for a moment, then reached out with his thoughts to make certain that his sanctum was sealed off from any who might wish to enter or attempt to hear within. Satisfied, he stared again at the fantastic images above, especially those of the magnificent fliers. A slight frown escaped him as he studied the details. Their wings were feathered like a bird's, the closest a mortal mind could come to the truth...and yet so very far from it. The countenances were akin to his own, youthful and unmarred, but somehow, at the same time, ancient and knowing. He credited the artist for that touch, it perhaps being the most accurate portrayal, even if also wrong in so many ways...

It had been years—nay, *centuries*—since he had revealed the truth, even to himself. Part of the reason had to do with his ongoing attempt to forget the past, to go on only forging a future that would be rid of any taint, any imperfection.

But a greater part of it had to do with *her*...and her terrible betrayal. He had never wanted to be reminded of what had been or what might have been. It had taken him several lifetimes just to thrust her to the back of his thoughts, then twice as many to bury her memory deep to pretend, on occasion, that she had never existed.

Yet...now it seemed that all his efforts had gone for naught.

So be it. He would unleash his righteous fury and she and the others would learn what it was to dare plot against him. They would be reminded of just *who* and what he was...just before they were annihilated.

The Prophet raised his hands high...and both he and the chamber were enveloped in light. The paintings, the murals—everything on the walls—faded away as if dew caught by a hot morning sun. Vanishing in their wake was literally *all* else—the intricate vases and the grand marble stands beneath them, the long, tapering rugs, the garlands of fresh flowers draping every wall...even the very couch upon which he had reclined. There remained *nothing* but the Prophet.

With but another thought, he next reshaped the chamber itself. From the very top of the ceiling to the floor beneath his feet, every inch of the room took on a gleaming, mirror-like finish. The Prophet stood reflected a hundred thousand times over, his glory undiminished no matter how great the distance the image was from the original.

But it was still not the true him. Unfamiliar emotion filled the Prophet. Desire. The desire to gaze upon his long-relinquished form. It suddenly became too much to bear. He stared at the foremost

reflection, remembering, then, in the next instant, made his memory reality once again.

The light he had earlier summoned focused upon him. It grew so bright that any normal man would have been immediately blinded no matter how well he covered his eyes. Even then, the light continued to strengthen, first taking on an aspect akin to searing white flame...and then becoming it in truth.

But the flames did not harm the Prophet, for they were a part of him as he was a part of them. He bathed in the white fire, let it melt away the false image of a youthful human that he had worn for far too long.

And in its place there stood revealed a towering, hooded figure with wings of that same flame, a figure who had no face as mortals understood it, but rather a wonderful radiance beneath long flashes of silver light that in their shaping somewhat resembled a magnificent mane of hair shadowed by the hood.

The other flames receded, allowing him to fully view his glorious image over and over. His long robe was pure sunlight, his great breastplate the shine of copper. Some would have recognized his as resembling a knight, but clearly of no mortal order. Even if the fiery wings that now stretched almost the full width of the chamber had not been a part of him, it would have been clear to any that his kind did not generally walk among something so lowly as Humanity. The light shimmering from within the hood was the true him, a unique combination of pure energy and tonal resonance that marked him as one distinct being even among his own illustrious kind.

And slowly he whispered the name that he had left behind on that fateful moment, the name which had once been sung in praise by the highest of the high.

The name she had oft murmured in love.

INARIUS...INARIUS... came a voice that was not a voice, but rather a sensation simultaneously experienced in mind, ear, and soul. *I AM INARIUS AGAIN.*

And in announcing it to himself, he felt a rush of jubilation. He was again *Inarius*, once of the Angiris Council, once a commander of the Heavenly Hosts!

Once a rebel against both the High Heavens and the Burning Hells...

The last remembrance doused much of his pleasure. Much, but not all. He had done what he had because both sides had become so mired in conflict that they could not see the ultimate futility of their struggle. Since the dawning of reality, when the two celestial realms had come into existence and, shortly thereafter, discord, their vast

forces had fought one another for the control of All. Anything of value became the focus of attack and counterattack, generally to its destruction. Angels—as his kind would have been called by humans—and demons alike perished by the legions, all in the name of the Angiris Council—they who ruled the High Heavens—and their eternal adversaries, the Prime Evils.

But Inarius had grown sick of the endless battles, the plotting and the counterplotting. Nothing was gained. Had he been in charge of the Council, he would have done things differently, but even his brother—brother in the sense that their resonances, their beings, held a distinct similarity compared with others’—would not see reason. Even Tyrael, he who was the essence of Justice, could not or would not understand the truth.

And so it was that Inarius at last chose to abandon his part in the struggle. Yet he could not help feeling that there had to be others like him, even in the Burning Hells. Making contact with such—either those of his own kind or, especially, the demons—proved a tricky situation, but Inarius had not been an advisor to the Council for nothing. He understood the machinations not only there, but as they would be in the Burning Hells, and that allowed him to circumnavigate the watchdogs of both. He soon began to locate those others and gather them secretly to him. To his surprise, there were far more than even he had dreamed, far more who saw no sense in battering away at one another throughout eternity. Even more astonishing, there had been among the demons one who had thought like Inarius long before the angel himself had dared to do so.

Her. The one who would awaken love in him as he would do in turn. The one with whom he would help forge a world, a place known to his band of rebels as *Sanctuary*.

The one who would turn his dream of a paradise into a nightmare of blood.

Inarius gazed at the mirrored images and saw her at his side again. She would not be wearing the form he recalled, not now. If she had truly found her way back, it would have been in a masked shape, female likely, but possibly male. She was cunning, beguiling...and a threat to all that was by right *his*.

YOU SHALL NOT TAKE FROM ME SANCTUARY, Inarius reprimanded her memory. *I WILL NOT LET YOU AGAIN DESTROY MY DREAM! SANCTUARY AND ALL IT CONTAINS WILL NOT BE YOURS, EVEN IF I MUST DESTROY IT MYSELF...AS IS MY RIGHT...*

After all, it had been Inarius who had kept it all from collapsing after her heinous betrayal. It had been he who had countered the plots of the Prime Evils and Lucion when they had discovered the realm and he who continued to keep the Angiris Council ignorant of all. The fate

of this world and all the brief lives on it were *his*, no one else's!

The angel dismissed the vision of her with what in humans would have been bitterness but what in Inarius was certainly no such base emotion. He was above all that, of course. He reacted only as events demanded, no more.

In fact, Inarius had *already* set into motion steps against her return. She kept herself veiled well, but not well enough. She could not hide from him; he knew her even as her brother did not. Having divined that she had in fact returned to Sanctuary, Inarius had then calculated where she had to be located. That had turned out to be no difficult matter, not given her obvious plan, a continuation of her ancient obsession.

I WILL NOT BROOK THE STIRRING OF THE NEPHALEM AGAIN, he thought, recalling what had happened last time. *SUCH AN ABOMINATION WILL NOT SEE FRUITION AGAIN!* He suddenly swelled up in size. His wings filled the vast chamber and the entire Cathedral shook with his anger, though his followers would blame that on a mere tremor. *YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE DARED RETURN, NOT DARED TO INFLUENCE THAT WHICH SHOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT BURIED SO DEEP...*

Inarius stared at his reflections. Humanity did have one advantage and he chose to use it again. With a thought, the angel altered his appearance, re-creating beneath the hood glimpses of a face akin to that of the gold-tressed Prophet. The eyes were still pure energy, but the rest had some semblance of mortal life.

More important, Inarius now had a mouth and on that mouth he set an angry edge, a scowl. It better allowed him to display for his own satisfaction his fury.

"You should not have dared return," the angel repeated, savoring the harsh movements of the mouth and the coarse tones that accented his words better. The scowl deepened in a yet more satisfying manner as Inarius added, "And you should not have dared try to cross me again, *Lilith...*"

They brought him gifts of flowers, food, and goods. Many of the gifts were simply discovered at the gates surrounding the estate of Master Ethon, left there by anonymous folk who had heard the tale from others.

"Partha has had its share of preachers and clerics talking of healing the body and soul," their host told Uldyssian. "Yet none of them were ever able to back their words with anything but emptiness!"

"I only did—I only did what I wished that I could've done for my

sister,” the son of Diomedes explained helplessly, not for the first time.

The tale of the boy’s healing had spread like wildfire throughout the town. Without exception, it was called a miracle, especially by the grateful mother. According to Ethon, she had gone from place to place, showing off what he had done for her only child and singing Uldyssian’s praises to the heavens.

“I know the woman. Bartha is her name. That child’s her treasure, her only love. His father died just before he was born. Fall from a horse.” The merchant and headman smiled sadly. “She always feared for the lad, though I know she never let him see that. Tries to teach him to be strong...”

“They have to stop leaving all these things,” Uldyssian interrupted, staring out the window overlooking the gates. Even as he watched, a furtive figure in a cloak dropped a basket that appeared to contain loaves of bread and a flask of wine. The guards there pointedly looked the other way, not helping Uldyssian’s situation. From what he had seen, they were as awed by him as the rest of the citizenry.

“My people are a generous, appreciative lot. They seek to honor you for your good deed, nothing more.”

“It would be best if we left before this gets any more out of hand, Uldyssian,” remarked Lylia. “We must be on our way to the city.”

The party had originally agreed to just stay overnight at Ethon’s estate. However, that single night had turned into two, then three. Ethon made no attempt to ask them to depart and Uldyssian had quickly found that he had missed such simple comforts as clean beds and proper meals. He liked Partha, liked the people, especially the kindly merchant. He was only embarrassed by the excess of generosity, something he felt he did not deserve.

“I can’t,” Uldyssian finally said to her. “Not yet.” Without warning, he started for the door.

The others rose to their feet. Achilios was the first to ask, “Where are you going?”

“Out to do what I must. Wait here.”

Uldyssian gave them no chance to argue with him. He especially worried about what Lylia would say if he hesitated. The plan was still to head on to Kehjan...just...not yet.

He all but flew down the stairs, but as he headed toward the doors, a slim figure caught up with him. Cedric, eyes wide, stepped up next to Uldyssian and began keeping pace.

“Are you finally going out? Are you? Will you do anything like the last time?” he asked excitedly.

The farmer grimaced. “I’m going out, but alone. Stay here, Ced. Stay for your safety.”

“Safety? Safety from what?”

Instead of answering, Uldyssian picked up his pace. He crossed the threshold just ahead of the boy. However, when Ethon’s son attempted to follow, it was to have the door shut right in front of him despite no one touching it.

Outside, Uldyssian breathed a short sigh of relief. He had hoped that the door would do as he wished, but actually having it happen still astounded him. No one would be able to open it again until Uldyssian was well into the town square. By then, it would be too late to stop him...

Unfortunately, if he had hoped to make it there unnoticed, in this his abilities failed him. Even before Uldyssian stepped beyond the gates of the estate, people began to gather in his vicinity. It was as if they had been waiting for him to finally come out...very likely the case, he mused. None of the faces he saw gave any indication of malice or fear, though. Something far different. Something he thought approached...reverence?

It was not the emotion he wanted of them. He had experienced it to a point with Serenthia and still felt uncomfortable. He was a simple man. He came to offer them something to put them on a level with himself and to free them from the control of the nobles and the mages...and, most of all, the Temple and the Cathedral. Uldyssian had no desire to be worshipped.

But first, he would have to show them that what he had done was not so much a miracle, not if they could learn to do it for themselves.

By the time he neared the town square, there followed in his wake a substantial throng. Uldyssian continued to sense nothing threatening in anyone around him. Perhaps he had overreacted in keeping his friends from coming with him immediately, but it was still possible that there would be one person around who might choose to see him as a thing of evil, a monster, as his own village had declared him.

The center of Partha consisted of an open, stone-paved area where, in the morning, merchants and farmers with wagons sold various wares, especially food and meat. They ringed a wide, round fountain in the middle of which stood a statue of a scholarly figure with a long, long beard and bearing twin scrolls under his arms. Master Ethon had called him Protheus, one of the founders of Partha and the man who had preached kindness and understanding. Uldyssian thought Protheus’s shadow a good one to have cast over him when he began his task.

Four leaping fish spouting water marked the outer edge of the fountain and directly between two of these was the location that Uldyssian chose. Protheus would be staring at the crowd from right behind him.

The market had still been active, but a hush spread through the townsfolk the moment he stopped. Uldyssian suddenly felt nervous. His mouth went dry and he was tempted to thrust his head in the fountain not only to try to quench his sudden thirst but to hide from the very audience he had sought out.

But then Uldyssian spotted a very familiar figure in the crowd. The woman, Bartha. He had only to glance down to discover her son, who beamed at the man who had healed him as if Uldyssian were his own father.

That gave him the heart that he had momentarily been lacking. Unconsciously mimicking the statue's stance, Uldyssian surveyed the crowd, then proclaimed, "What I've done is no miracle!"

His words were met with disbelief by some, confusion by others. Bartha smiled as if he had told some gentle joke. *She* was absolutely certain of what she had witnessed and her son was proof of that.

However, Uldyssian shook his head at her, then continued, "It is no miracle...because it lies within each of you to do as *much*, if not more!"

Now a murmur arose among the people, many of them clearly not believing this suggestion any more than the last.

"Hear me!" the son of Diomedes shouted at the top of his voice. "Hear me! Only a short while back, I was no different from the rest of you! I toiled in my farm, concerned only with my day's work. I thought of little else. The vicious bickering of the mage clans was not for me, save that I hoped it would not spill over into my village! Nor was I concerned with the empty words of missionaries from the Temple and the Cathedral, knowing how they had done *nothing* for my family, who first suffered long from plague, then withered slowly into death!"

Here, he received sympathetic glances and nods of understanding from several in the crowd. Uldyssian spied at least a handful of people who wore the pockmarked faces of plague survivors. Partha might overall be very prosperous, but its individual citizens suffered their black days, clearly.

He shook his head. "I said that what I did was no miracle, but for me there *did* come a miracle one day, an awakening of something *within* me...a force, a power...call it what you like! Things began to happen around me. Some feared them, some did not." That was as far as he would go into the story of what had happened in Seram. If the townsfolk discovered the truth later on, so be it. By then, either Uldyssian would have convinced them or proven himself a madman after all. "I was able to *do* things, *help* others..."

He gestured at the boy—whose name he realized he still did not

know—urging the child to come to him. Bartha patted her son on the back, sending him off to Uldyssian. The child ran up and hugged the tall figure tight.

“I was able to help him,” Uldyssian added, letting everyone see the arm. The boy smiled at him. “And what I did, you can do, too. Perhaps not immediately, but you *will*.”

Many shook their heads or frowned. It was one thing for them to believe that he could perform miracles, but still they could not conceive of such abilities in themselves.

With a sigh, Uldyssian considered. Perhaps he moved too swiftly even for the understanding people of Partha. Perhaps he just had to show them.

“Bartha,” the son of Diomedes called. “Come up here, too. Please.”

Beaming, she rushed up. “Yes, Holy One?”

Her use of such a title caused him to wince. He did not wish to be put in the same category as Malic and his ilk. Never that. “I’m just Uldyssian, Bartha, a farmer by birth, like many you know.” Her expression immediately told him that his words passed by unnoticed. With a sigh, he finished, “Just call me Uldyssian, please.”

She nodded, which was all he could hope for at this juncture.

“Stand beside me.” When she had obeyed, he looked for the man whose face had most been ravaged by disease. “You there. Come to me.”

There was a moment of hesitation, then the sandy-haired figure stepped up before Uldyssian. He held his cap in his hand as if it were a form of security.

“What’s your name?”

“Jonas, Holy One.”

Uldyssian tried not to react again. He would get them to stop... eventually. “May we touch your face?”

Again, there was a pause, but finally the man nodded. “Yes. Yes, Holy One.”

Uldyssian reached to Bartha, taking one of her soft hands in his own. She allowed him to guide it up to the ruined flesh, unfearful of touching it despite its grotesque appearance. That impressed him. It was one thing to see someone disfigured so, it was another to actually *feel* that scarred skin beneath one’s fingertips. He had chosen the right person with which to start.

As both his fingers and hers made contact with the man, Uldyssian closed his eyes and tried to imagine the flesh whole. At the same time, he also reached out to Bartha, trying to see inside her and let her feel what he was doing.

He felt her abruptly shiver, but she did not pull away. Grateful for

that, Uldyssian focused on the figure before him. The man was understandably anxious, perhaps most of all from being the center of attention. Uldyssian knew that he had to hurry, if only to prevent Jonas from growing faint of heart and retreating.

Uldyssian tried to recall the emotions that had flowed through him when he had healed the boy's arm. It proved easier to bring them to the forefront than last time, something that surprised him.

The pain, the loss, coursed through him. He knew others who had suffered disfigurement as this man had, people in his village whom he could not help now. Perhaps...perhaps if all went as hoped, Uldyssian could someday return to Seram and make amends...

Then, as if such thoughts were the key, the force within suddenly poured out of him. He sensed Bartha's renewed astonishment, an astonishment mixed with immense pleasure.

He also sensed the man feel the power flowing into him, and, specifically, his ravaged face.

A gasp of wonder rose from those watching. Uldyssian dared open his eyes—

His fingertips had already given him some hint of the results, but seeing them still amazed Uldyssian at least as much as it did the throngs. The damaged skin was pink and whole...in fact, there was no longer a blemish or mark *anywhere* on the man's countenance.

"Another miracle!" Bartha breathed.

The subject of Uldyssian's experiment put his own hands to his face, marveling at the feel of his skin. He turned toward his fellows, giving them a good view of the results.

Before they could start praising him again, the son of Diomedes loudly interjected, "Bartha, did you feel everything? Did you?"

Her expression turning confused, she replied, "I felt you heal him —"

He cut her off. "What do you feel inside *yourself*? Do you sense it yet?"

She touched over her heart. The crowd—including the healed man—looked at her.

"I feel...I feel..." She smiled beatifically at Uldyssian. "I feel as if I've just awakened, Holy—Master Uldyssian! It...it's...I don't know how to describe it..."

Nodding, he looked to the others. "That's how it begins. The feeling will continue to grow. It may take time, but slowly...slowly...you'll come to be everything I am...and possibly more. Possibly much more."

It was a weighty promise and one that Uldyssian in great part regretted the minute that he uttered it. Yet, now it was too late to turn

back. As he learned more about what he was able to do, he would try to teach the others, at least until someone else could do better.

That meant that Kehjan would have to wait even longer than he had initially intended. Uldyssian could not very well leave the people of Partha until they understood better.

Immediately, he thought of Lylia. She would be upset at first, surely, but, as in the past, she would come around. When the noblewoman saw how the Parthans reacted, it would make absolute sense to her to stay as long as needed.

At least, he hoped that she would see it that way.

The man he had healed came up to him again. "Master Uldyssian.... could you...could you show me?"

Uldyssian started to reach forward, then hesitated. He smiled, surprised himself not to have sensed it sooner. "I guess I don't have to. You should know that. Just look deep. You'll see..."

Jonas's brow furrowed...then suddenly joy filled his face again. It had nothing to do with his mended skin. He nodded eagerly, all but shouting, "I feel...I think...what Madame Bartha said! I feel... awakened..."

His awestruck words were enough to cause the crowd to break into excited babble. Someone stepped toward Uldyssian. That caused the entire crowd to flow forward. Each person wanted to be the next.

Caught up in the moment, Uldyssian accepted one after another, spending what time he needed with each. Hands stretched toward him, seeking his touch. Not all of them would feel the awakening as quickly as Bartha and Jonas had and he said this to every person before trying, but it *would* eventually happen. Uldyssian truly believed that and because he believed that, so, too, did those to whom he ministered.

As each new supplicant stepped up, he also grew more and more confident with his decision. Partha was indeed a perfect place to prove himself. If he was able to do this well here, it staggered Uldyssian's imagination to think just how matters would fare in the city.

No, a short respite in the town would surely not endanger matters...

Surrounded by so many, Uldyssian did not notice that, far back, the one whose thoughts most mattered to him watched him now with veiled eyes. Lylia stood at the base of a set of steps overlooking the fountain, drinking in the sight. Oddly, despite the noblewoman's arresting appearance, not one among all those there so much as noticed her.

But *she* noticed everything, including that what Uldyssian had set into motion here would keep him occupied for quite some time to come. *Too long*, in fact. He should have nearly reached Kehjan by now. That was how she had planned it. Not this highly suspicious turn to Partha, of all places.

Yet, after a moment's consideration, Lylia suddenly smiled. Plans were made to be adjusted constantly.

"If not Kehjan, then by all means here, my *love*," the blond woman whispered to herself. "In the end, the location does not matter. You will yet bring to me what is rightfully mine, Uldyssian...you will... even if you must *die* to do it..."

TWELVE

Achilios found Serenthia not where he had expected, that expectation being that Cyrus's daughter would be assisting Uldyssian with his task. Instead, the hunter discovered the dark-haired woman sitting where she could see the proceedings, but was far enough away not to be a part of them. Her eyes were, of course, on Uldyssian—to ask otherwise would have been unthinkable even to Achilios—although as the archer approached, his own keen gaze noticed hers surreptitiously shift to Lylia, then back to the son of Diomedes again.

"I brought you some water," he said as way of interjecting himself into her private world. He offered her the sack he had carried with him, freshly filled at Master Ethon's estate. Ever practical—save when it came to love—Achilios had first paused to gather something to drink before chasing after his friend.

Serenthia took it with a nod of thanks. She drank far more from it than Achilios assumed that she would, which meant she had been sitting out here for quite some time, just watching. Likely Serenthia had run all the way here, fearing some imagined danger, whereas he had taken his time, somehow aware that Uldyssian was utterly safe.

When she was done, he took the sack back and remarked, "It's truly astonishing, isn't it, Serry?"

"Yes, it is."

"I've been his friend since we were children." Without asking, he took up a place next to her. It was as forward as he dared get. Despite his sometimes gregarious appearance, Achilios was much more at home in the forest, alone with his quarry. In social circumstances, he felt only one step above Mendeln and, where the woman next to him was concerned, as awkward.

His comment caused her to look at him with such intensity that Achilios wondered what he had said wrong. Serenthia appeared poised to say something, but it was almost a full minute before a single word escaped her lips.

And when she did speak, it was not on the subject that he assumed it would be. "Why *are* the two of you friends, Achilios? You seem so different in so many ways."

He had no answer save "Because we just are, I guess. We were friends the moment that we met." He shrugged. "Children are like that."

“I suppose.” Serenthia thought for a moment, then asked, “Is she what *you* would dream of?”

Now the subject he had expected was at hand. Serenthia had merely taken a more circuitous route to it. “Lydia? She is fair, to be honest, and no man would let his gaze pass over her without noticing that, but the same could be said for others, not merely her.”

He could barely have been more blunt—in his eyes—but she seemed not to understand that he meant her. “I know that to us she is exotic and I can understand why Uldyssian would fall for her, but it was all so quick, Achilios.”

“It can be like that.” It *had* been like that for him...in a sense. One day, he had known only Serry the impish child. The next day, there had stood the beautiful woman. Achilios had been so lost in amazement of the change that, for the next week, he went without a single catch to his credit.

Serenthia was silent for a time and Achilios satisfied himself with being in her company...which was how such situations generally ended. They watched as Uldyssian greeted one Parthan after another. Each time he succeeded in doing whatever it was he did, Achilios noticed both his friend and the one touched share a look of immense satisfaction.

“Is that the way you felt?” he finally dared ask Serenthia. “Like them?”

“Yes.” But the way she said it made the hunter not so certain.

“Have you been able to do anything?”

This time there was a pause, followed by, “I don’t know.”

“How could you—”

Her tone grew more adamant. “I *don’t* know.”

Normally, Achilios would have left it at that, but this time, he could not. “Serry, what do you mean?”

Her gaze shifted not to him, but rather her hands. “I feel it, just as I know many of them do, but that’s all. I haven’t noticed anything else different around me. I’ve tried to think of things, make them happen, but...but as far as I know, nothing *has*.”

“Still? I would’ve thought by now that—”

Now she looked at him. Her eyes were steely. “So would I. Believe me, so would I.”

It made no sense to him. Lydia had already displayed several instances of ability, such as making flowers and berries bloom on bushes or healing some minor cuts suffered by one of the mounts. She had also summoned a rabbit to them, saving Achilios from having to hunt but leaving the archer feeling as if somehow the animal had been cheated of its chance to survive.

“What about *you*?” his companion asked without warning. “I haven’t seen anything from you, either.”

In truth, Achilios did feel something within him seeking to grow, but he had done his best to smother it. He had told no one of that decision. Many might desire the gift that Uldyssian offered, but not his best friend. Achilios was satisfied with being who he was. A hunter and a simple man.

“I suspect that I’m not the best student for Uldyssian,” he returned. “Not at all.”

“But no one taught *him*, not really! With Uldyssian, it came as suddenly as the storm over Seram...which apparently was caused by him, too!”

“Uldyssian was pressed on all sides, Serry. He was accused of brutal murder by Brother Mikelius. The Inquisitors would have dragged him back off to the Cathedral, probably to burn as a fiend! He had no choice!”

She was not convinced. “It was all terrible, but why at that time? Why not when his family slowly and horribly perished from plague? Why not then? Why even him, for that matter? There are so many others who’ve suffered worse and yet we’ve never heard of such an astounding thing before! It would’ve even reached Seram, you know that!” Even as he nodded his agreement to this argument, Serenthia went on, “And why not Mendeln, then? He suffered as much, too! His family was wiped out and his brother was accused of a terrible crime! It could’ve been him, but it wasn’t! I’ve seen nothing unusual about Mendeln, have you?”

Her mention of Mendeln made Achilios flinch. Serenthia noticed his reaction and her eyes narrowed.

“What is it, Achilios? What about Mendeln? Is he manifesting abilities like his brother?”

It was not the suggestion of that which had caused the archer to flinch, but rather a brief and unexpected recollection of another time, another place. As Serenthia had spoken of Uldyssian’s sibling, Achilios had *relived* the moment when he and his other friend had inspected the mysterious stone near Seram. Not only had the archer seen again Mendeln freezing in place before it, but he had also reexperienced touching it himself...and the awful emptiness that had overwhelmed him until he had managed to pull free.

“No...” Achilios finally managed. “No...nothing like Uldyssian.”

She was not convinced. “Achilios, what—”

Without warning, a tremendous sense of fear overcame the hunter, but not fear for himself. He had the awful feeling that something was happening to Mendeln at this very moment.

Achilios leaped to his feet, startling his companion.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

He wanted to answer her, but the urgency he felt was too strong. Without a word, Achilios began running. He ignored Serenthia’s concerned call after him.

But barely out of sight of the woman he loved, Achilios came to a dead stop. The fear for Mendeln had not lessened any, but the archer hesitated to begin his run anew.

The truth was, Achilios had no idea just *where* Uldyssian’s brother had gone.

The streets through which Mendeln moved were oddly empty and the buildings around him had suddenly taken on an unsettling gray cast. There was no wind whatsoever and not the slightest sound. Mendeln would have felt very alone save for one thing...he was still surrounded by the shades of the guards Uldyssian had slain.

Since their arrival, it had taken monumental effort on his part to keep from screaming out the truth to the others. Either these shadows of men existed or he had gone mad...or both. Mendeln did not know which would be worse. He only knew that he just wanted to tell *someone* what was happening to him.

But he had not. He had said nothing even when they had arrived in Partha, where his hopes that the ghosts would leave him had dissipated the moment the first of the shades had passed through into the town. Until then, Mendeln had believed that his haunting would be temporary. Now, he feared that the dead would always be with him.

“Fear” was perhaps no longer the right word, though. Certainly, they kept him anxious, but the more they were around him, the less frightened he became. They did nothing but stare. Not in condemnation, but as if awaiting some word from him. So far, though, Mendeln had said little directly to them. He had asked them to please kindly go away, but since they had not obeyed, he had seen no reason to continue any further attempt at conversation.

At the moment, they were the least of his concerns. As he continued through the town, Mendeln began noticing peculiar signs of age on the buildings, as if Partha were some ancient place long abandoned. The shift became more apparent with each step. The grayness grew darker, veering toward the black...

This was not right, he realized. Where was everyone? Where was Uldyssian, after whom he had been chasing? Mendeln was worried about his brother, especially what the Parthans might do. He recalled

too vividly what had happened in Seram, where people who had known Uldyssian all his life had turned on him...

But then there arose a sight ahead that made Mendeln falter in his steps and forget all about his brother. He spun around with the intention of fleeing...only to find himself facing the very direction he had just abandoned.

A direction that led to a long-neglected cemetery. A cemetery that, from its ancient state, surely could not be Partha's.

With the shades of dead men already surrounding him, Uldyssian's brother could see nothing but ill coming of entering the overgrown burial site. Yet, when he tried to back away, the cemetery only drew nearer. Nevertheless, Mendeln tried one more step back—

And in the next breath found himself standing *within* the ruined grounds.

A choking sound was all he could muster as he tried to come to grips with what was happening. He prayed that it was only a bad dream, but knew otherwise. Mendeln then thought of his blackouts and wondered if this was some bizarre continuation of them. He certainly had no other answer.

He suddenly noticed another very curious—and unsettling—thing. The shades of the dead guards had not entered with him. They drifted beyond the arched gateway, as if the winged gargoyle he saw above it kept them at bay. For the first time, Mendeln would have liked their company, if only because of their comparative familiarity. Now he was completely alone, facing who-knew-what.

As he started to turn his gaze back...what felt like a *hand* pushed him deeper into the cemetery. Stumbling several steps, Mendeln glanced over his shoulder. He immediately swallowed. Naturally, there was *no one* there.

The farmer glanced down at the first of the graves. A crescent-shaped stone marked the spot. The grave had been dug so long ago that it was infested with generations of weeds and grass and had even sunken in a bit. Mendeln started to look away again, then eyed the marker one more time.

Barely legible in the odd, gray shadows, was the same script that he had seen on the stone near Seram.

Despite himself, Mendeln grew fascinated by the revelation. Keeping respectful to the grave, he knelt to the side, then leaned toward the stone. Up close, Mendeln was able to verify what he had seen. Many of the very same symbols ran along the crescent, but in patterns that he did not recognize.

Without hesitation, he ran his fingers over the first line. Immediately, he sensed some sort of power emanating from the

symbols. Mendeln had heard of words of power, such as the mage clans supposedly used at times, and he could only surmise that these were such.

Looking up, Uldyssian's brother surveyed the seemingly endless field of stones. The graves were marked in a variety of manners. In addition to the crescents, there were star-shaped slabs, squat rectangular ones, and more. Surveying the landscape ahead, Mendeln even spotted one overlooked by a towering, winged statue bearing a weapon in one hand.

Drawn by that statue, he slipped among the graves in order to get a better look. Fascination replaced dread. He had to learn more. Was this some repository for the dead of the mage clans? If so, did they have some tie to what was happening to him...and to Uldyssian, for that matter? Until now, he would have doubted it, what little he had gleaned from merchants indicating that the once-powerful clans had all but shut themselves off from the world as they continued their arcane duels of wit against one another. They would hardly have the time to bother themselves with a pair of farmers far from the city.

Although the statue stood deep in the cemetery, it seemed that Mendeln had barely begun toward it when suddenly it loomed over him. He paused, trying to understand what it was supposed to be. A winged being, with a face hooded save for glimpses of the mouth and some cascading hair. It wore a robe and breastplate somewhat akin to that of the Cathedral's Inquisitors, but sculpted to resemble some finer material. The breastplate also had script upon it, more words in the same mysterious language.

Mendeln glanced at the wings again, realizing that they were different from those of birds. What he had taken for feathering looked, when studied closer, more of an artist's rendition of *flame*. Mendeln had never heard legends of any creature or spirit with such wings, not even in the stories his mother had told him when he had been a very young child.

In the giant figure's left hand it held a great sword whose tip rested on the base beneath the statue. The other hand pointed down, not merely, it seemed to Mendeln, indicating the grave beneath, but also those around it. He had the distinct impression that this was supposed to *mean* something to him, but what, Uldyssian's brother could not say.

And so, despite his situation, Mendeln grew frustrated beyond belief. He was a patient man in general, but someone appeared to be trying—very successfully—to draw him past his limits.

"All right, then!" he shouted, his voice echoing over and over and over in the silence. "If you want something from me, then tell me what it is! Tell me, I demand it!"

The moment that he finished, a grating sound filled his ears. Swallowing, Mendeln watched in horror as the statue's pointing hand turned enough so that it now indicated what was written on the base.

Mendeln waited for it to do something else, but the winged guardian froze once more. Slowly, he built up the nerve to look down at what was below.

The same ancient script greeted him. He had hardly expected otherwise, but still this added to his frustration.

"But I cannot *read* it!" he muttered. "I do not know what any of it says!" Squinting, Mendeln attempted to recall the words that had come unbidden to him that frightening time when the demon had caught him alone in the woods. He remembered the images in his head and the sounds of those words, but they were still not enough to help Mendeln with what now lay before him.

Weary of the futility of this nightmare, Mendeln finally dared lean on the grave as he studied each mark. His mouth formed shapes, but that was all. Nothing, absolutely nothing, made sense.

"What does it say?" he growled under his breath. "*What* does it say?"

The Dragon has chosen you...

Mendeln jerked to his feet. He had heard a voice like that once before, back in Seram. It was akin to the voice of Cyrus...

Cyrus, *after* he had been killed.

Part of him wanted to scream for this new one to get out of his head, but another part fixed on what had been said. *The Dragon has chosen you...*

He stared at the ancient script and read it anew. "The Dragon has chosen me—you...the...Dragon...has...chosen...you..."

And suddenly, Uldyssian's brother could read that line. More important, *other* symbols now made more sense. Mendeln felt that he was now on the verge of discovering the meanings of all of them and, in doing so, discovering the truth about what was happening.

But what did the phrase actually relate to? Kneeling close again, Mendeln studied the symbol representing the most important word... Dragon. A loop twisting into itself, a thing without beginning or end. Mendeln knew what a dragon was from legends; why would this mark represent such a creature? And why such a creature at all?

"What happened?" Mendeln quietly asked...then frowned when he noted how he had phrased the question. He had meant to ask *what is happening*. Why would he—

The dirt beneath his hand suddenly shifted...as if something beneath was seeking to dig its way *out*.

Eyes round, Mendeln scrambled back. In doing so, he inadvertently

threw himself atop another of the graves, where, to his further dismay, something *also* began to stir beneath.

Worse, it began to register on him that graves *everywhere* were shifting, stirring. Mounds of upturned dirt decorated many already and Mendeln's imagination pictured skeletal figures readying to emerge.

But just as it seemed that his imagination would become a monstrous reality, there formed in the shadow of the winged statue a figure entirely shrouded in black. Mendeln had a momentary glimpse of a face not unlike his own in that it was studious in nature, but otherwise very, very different. It had an unreal handsomeness to it, as only a sculpture or a painting could achieve.

The figure drew a single symbol in the air, a daggerlike mark that for a single blink flared a bright white. What sounded like a great sigh swept through the cemetery—

The graves stilled. The cloaked form vanished...and, at that point, Mendeln's surroundings changed.

He was still in Partha, that much even his jolted mind would have guessed, but Uldyssian's brother no longer stood within the cemetery. Instead, Mendeln was poised at its gateway, the gargoyle's grinning maw seeming to mock his sanity. The cemetery no longer looked ancient and overrun, but well-kept, as one would have expected in Partha.

But no matter how hard he squinted, Mendeln could see no winged statue.

Something touched his shoulder, causing him to yelp like a kicked hound. Strong fingers grasped Mendeln and turned him around.

To his relief, it was Achilios, not some fiend from the dead.

"Mendeln! Are you all right! What are you doing *here*?" The hunter looked almost as pale as Uldyssian's brother felt. Achilios's eyes darted past Mendeln to study the cemetery with utter loathing. "Did you go in there?"

"I—No." It seemed best to Mendeln not to try to explain, since he himself was not quite certain just what had taken place. A delusion? A dream? Insanity?

Instead, Mendeln focused on a new and intriguing question. "Achilios, my friend, why are *you* here? Did you follow me?"

This time, it was the archer who hesitated before replying with an equally suspicious "Yes. I did." Achilios gave Mendeln a sudden grin, then slapped the farmer on the shoulder. "Don't want you getting lost, eh, Mendeln? Town this size, lots of things to distract you, hmm?"

Mendeln was not certain whether he was supposed to be insulted by such comments, but chose to ignore them for the sake of both men.

Perhaps another time, he could share his secrets with Achilios and the hunter could do the same with him. Those secret, he believed, all focused on that fateful stone back home.

“You need to come with me back to the square. Uldyssian—”

It shamed Mendeln that he had not been concerned about his brother. Nervously rubbing his hands together, he blurted “Uldyssian! Is he all right?”

“More than that,” replied Achilios. “But you’ll have to see to understand—” He happened to look down at Mendeln’s hands. His brow arched. “Your hands are covered in dirt! What—?”

“I tripped in the street just before here and had to use my hands to keep from striking the stone with my face,” Mendeln quickly explained. “There was dirt there,” he added rather lamely.

To his relief and surprise, the blond bowman took this answer at face value, too. “A fall in the street! You’re getting too absentminded for your own good! Here, let’s find something to wipe your hands off with and be on our way...”

With nothing else around, Mendeln finally had to brush his hands against his garments. As a farmer, he was used to doing such, but felt a little embarrassed to be seen so in Partha. Yet, they could not very well return to Master Ethon’s home first. Mendeln dearly wanted to see what was happening in the square.

He started to follow Achilios, only to falter but a few steps later. Making certain that his friend was not looking his way, Mendeln spun in a quick circle, searching.

The ghosts who had been with him since the battle in the wild were nowhere to be found. It was as if that, when the shrouded figure had sent the spirits of the graves to their rest, it had also done the same for the shades of the Temple’s guards.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Did you say something?” asked the archer, pausing to let him catch up.

“No...” Mendeln replied with a vigorous shake of his head. “No.”

Achilios took this answer as he had the others, for which Uldyssian’s brother was grateful. Yet, as they hurried along, Mendeln’s mind stayed not with his sibling’s situation, but the unsettling, indeed, even *sinister*, episode through which he had just suffered.

One thing about it haunted him most of all. Not what had happened, not exactly. No, it was a new question that the strange vision had raised...or rather, *two* new questions bound together.

What was the Dragon...and why had it chosen *him*?

Despite Achilios's genial appearance, his mood was actually darker than when he had gone off in search of Mendeln. The archer had not at all expected to discover Uldyssian's brother standing at the very entrance to such a place. It had brought back full-blown for a second time the horrific sensations that Achilios had suffered after touching the stone.

He had tried to cover up his abrupt anguish immediately and was thankful that Mendeln had been so preoccupied that he had not noticed. Unfortunately, that preoccupation had drawn the hunter's attention in turn...and was what ate away at Achilios even now.

When asked if he had entered the cemetery, Mendeln had denied doing such a thing. Yet, Achilios did not have to have a master hunter's honed senses to know that the dirt on the other's hands was not what would have been found in the street. It had a drier consistency, an aged look, and there had been some bits of weed and grass mixed in, too.

The sort of dirt that would have been more likely found—very easily—in a cemetery.

That, in turn, caused Achilios to remember another time, back in Seram, when Brother Mikelius had wished to see the grave of the murdered missionary...and had proclaimed to the archer and the others there that someone had desecrated it. The Master Inquisitor had believed Uldyssian somehow responsible. Uldyssian or someone near to him.

And now here was Mendeln at another cemetery, with dirt on his hands, Mendeln, who had been curiously absent during much of the events in the village.

Mendeln...who in some ways was beginning to frighten Achilios even more than Uldyssian.

THIRTEEN

Day followed after day in Partha with no end to Uldyssian's task. It was not that he could not sense the forces stirring within most of those who came to him, but that their progress beyond that did not leap forward—as his and even Lylia's had done—mystified Uldyssian. He spoke of it with her as they lay in bed in the elegant quarters granted them by the generous Master Ethon, but Lylia seemed not at all bothered by the lack of results.

"It shows that you are even more special, my love, as I already knew," she cooed, her hand running over his chest. "But give it a few more days. I think you will begin to see what you desire."

"I'm glad you think so," he returned morosely. "I also appreciate it more since I know you weren't happy when we found ourselves here instead of nearly in Kehjan."

"I am, if nothing else, very adaptable, dear Uldyssian. I have been forced to be."

Uldyssian would have questioned her remark, but when he looked at her again, it was to discover that Lylia had just drifted off to sleep. A few minutes later, he fell asleep, too, for the next few hours happily relieved of his concerns.

The noblewoman's prediction came to pass barely two days later. By this time, Uldyssian had touched nearly everyone in the town. There were astonishingly few people hesitant about awakening the gift within themselves and fewer yet that he could deny.

It was Master Ethon who suggested those who should be forbidden time with Uldyssian. They were criminals all, the most suspicious and untrustworthy. As lead justice of the Parthan tribunal, the merchant knew most of them by face. He made certain to stand by Uldyssian once he knew what was happening.

"That man there," Ethon had declared. "Be wary of giving him anything..." He then pointed to another. "He's likely to slit your throat while you greet him, so watch that one, too."

In the beginning, Uldyssian had dutifully obeyed, but on this day, he saw again the first man in question, an unsavory, bearded soul by the name of Romus. A wicked scar ran across a good portion of his

bald pate, a result, no doubt of his nefarious activities. The moment that Romus saw that he in turn was being observed, he started to leave. However, Uldyssian suddenly decided that he *wanted* to speak with the disreputable figure.

“Romus! Romus! Come to me!”

Hundreds of pairs of eyes fixed on Romus. He had no choice but to step forward despite scowls from the town Guard and many others.

Master Ethon, too, was not pleased. “Uldyssian, I know you mean well, lad, but such as *him* would be more of a danger if given the gift —”

Lylia put a soft hand on the merchant’s arm. “But dear Ethon! How do you know that some others like Romus have not already received Uldyssian’s aid? Can you claim to know *every* villain to walk Partha?”

“No, my lady, but I know a damn lot—pardon my saying so—and this one’s among the worst!”

She would not be dissuaded. “You have seen the faces of those who have been awakened. You yourself have experienced it, too. Look deep. Do you think that you could ever use it for ill?”

Ethon faltered. “No...never...but...”

“No one *could*,” Lylia insisted. “No one could.”

Not bothering to wait to see what his host might say next, Uldyssian reached for Romus, who looked less like a threat and more like a frightened child. The bald man was surrounded by a good many townsfolk who considered Uldyssian something of a holy figure.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Uldyssian. To the crowd, he added, “Give him some room. It’s all right.”

As they obeyed, the son of Diomedes drew him closer. Romus frowned but let himself be guided.

Still at Master Ethon’s side, Lylia leaned forward, her gaze intent.

The rest of the townsfolk watched warily, Romus’s reputation apparently well known. They were ready to defend Uldyssian if anything happened.

But Uldyssian himself had no such fears. The moment that he touched the other man’s hands, the force within him surged forth. Uldyssian immediately felt it stir something within Romus. The bald man gasped and a look of wonder spread across his face. It made him look like a completely different person, one whom Uldyssian would have trusted with his life.

“It’s—It’s—” Romus stammered.

“Yes, it is.”

Uldyssian stepped back, as ever, giving the person a chance to come to grips with the change themselves. Romus chuckled like a child and a tear slid down his cheek. With both hands, he rubbed the top of his

head as he tried to comprehend.

As the hands came away, Lylia abruptly called, "Uldyssian! See what he's done! Look at the scar!"

Uldyssian could *not* look at it...for it no longer existed. The skin where once the jagged cut had lain was now as healthy and as pink as that on Jonas's restored face.

And it had not been because of any effort by Uldyssian.

That was not immediately apparent to the townsfolk, who applauded this latest work as his. Quickly raising his hands high, Uldyssian waited for the crowd to quiet, then shouted, "What you see was none of my doing! None at all! What you see before you...the miracle you've witnessed...Romus did himself!" When cries of denial arose, he grew more stern. "I say this and I know this! Who here would call me false?"

No one there *could*. Many began looking in amazement at Romus, who shook his head over and over, trying to deny the truth as much as his neighbors had a moment before.

But Uldyssian would not let him. "Romus, come join me here by the fountain! Let the others see!"

Wordlessly, the bearded man obeyed. Others crowded forward, murmuring to one another and pointing at the healed area. Romus began to turn a deep shade of crimson. There was nothing about him that looked like the hardened criminal Master Ethon had first identified.

"Uncanny..." muttered the merchant from the background. "Is it possible?"

Lylia clutched their host's arm tight. "It is!" she breathed to Ethon. "Do you understand *now*?"

"Yes...yes...I suppose I do..."

Meanwhile, Uldyssian had gathered the people's attention again. "It may be some time before anything manifests again, but you see now what is possible! Let no one doubt that *everyone* will be able to do the same...and more!"

That was enough to send the throng into a roar. Many fell to their knees and thanked Uldyssian, who looked extremely upset by this reaction.

"Get up! Get up!" he insisted. His fury shook his followers. They stared fearfully.

He did not care. They had to understand. "No one bows to me! I'm no king, no patriarch of a mage clan! I was and still am a simple *farmer*! My land, my home, may be lost to me, but that's what I remain even with what I've been granted! I offer to share, not to command! Never, ever, kneel to me again! There are no masters here!

Only equals!”

Even as he said it, Uldyssian knew that they did not entirely see it that way. They would look to him for answers, for direction. He consoled himself with the thought that he acted as teacher, as guide. One day soon, most would no longer need him. There was even the possibility that some would surpass Uldyssian and that he, in turn, would have to learn from them.

For the time being, though, it was all up to him. Romus’s startling act, though, gave him renewed hope. Each person was individual. As a farmer, he understood how growth varied. All he had to do was be more patient.

He had the time. Kehjan was not expecting him. He could stay here until he was certain. That would make it all the better when he did present himself to the inhabitants of the city.

Feeling better about matters, Uldyssian turned to the next supplicant...and the next...and the next...

Malic was being more cautious, this time. Not because he felt any concern about facing Uldyssian, but because he wanted the mission to go very cleanly. The morlu could be a double-edged sword in some respects. They were very capable, but their tendency for bloodshed almost rivaled that of demons. Fortunately, the master had chosen a capable servant in Damos and Damos had chosen well in his five warriors. Collectively, they were a far more potent force than the demons and guards that the cleric had led previously.

Damos even now stalked ahead of the party, sniffing the air like a beast on the scent. The other morlu sat eagerly in the saddle, awaiting word of the prey.

“This way they came,” grated Damos. He raised his ram’s skull helmet up to the sky and sniffed again. “And in this place, they turned...that way.”

Malic’s gaze followed the outthrust arm. “Are you certain?”

The lead morlu grinned, revealing sharp, yellowed teeth. “I smell the blood, high priest...”

“They were heading toward Kehjan. When last I encountered them, they were well on their way to the lowlands and the jungles. Veering off in *that* direction means an extreme detour.”

Damos shrugged. To his kind, such considerations were unnecessary. All that mattered was where the prey could be found, not what direction it had run before the hunt.

The cleric stroked his monstrous arm, a motion that had, in the short time since the transformation, become an unconscious habit. The

clawed fingers twitched. Just before the party had left, the master had finally told him what the hand could do. Malic was now eager to try it...but to do that he had to reach his quarry.

“We go that way, then,” the high priest finally declared.

Grunting, Damos returned to his dark steed. That following the trail was what they needed to do was very obvious to all the morlu, but they knew their place and so did not make anything of the cleric’s unnecessary comment. The high priest could send them to their deaths if he so desired, so long as it served the Temple. They would not question his leadership unless commanded to by the master.

With Malic in the lead, the band rode on at a furious clip. Curiously, their mounts left no trails of their own and, indeed, even the clatter of hooves was missing. Had there been any other person there to witness their passing, they might have noticed that the hooves did not even quite touch the ground...

Night settled again upon the town of Partha. An exhausted Uldyssian fell into his bed. He barely noticed Lylia slide in beside him before sleep overtook the farmer.

Dreams soon invaded his slumber, pleasant interludes in which he was able to help the sick and maimed everywhere learn how to heal themselves or bring burnt lands back to bloom. Uldyssian watched the world become a paradise and its people reach a point of perfection undreamed...

Then, in the midst of the harmony and love, calamity broke out. Fissures opened in the ground and even the sky developed cracks. It was as if his home was hidden inside a vast egg now being broken open by something *outside*.

And in the next breath, the heavens filled with fiery-winged figures and from the fissures rose monstrous, scaled hordes. The two fearsome armies immediately collided with one another, with Humanity caught in the middle. Men, women, and children were torn to bloody gobbets by the unnoticing warriors of both sides. Thousands lay strewn dead in an instant.

“Stop!” Uldyssian roared. “Stop!”

None of the combatants paid heed to his cries and when he sought to use his gifts to make them listen, nothing happened.

“They’re all over us!” shouted Achilios, suddenly at his side. “Do something! I’m almost out of arrows!” Indeed, the archer had apparently managed to bring down nearly a hundred of the fighters, but still the tide flowed toward where Uldyssian and he stood. “This is your fault!” Achilios insisted, growing angry. “Your fault!”

“No!” Uldyssian whirled from the hunter and his accusations, only to find Serenthia gazing at him from afar. She stood surrounded by a sea of furious warriors, oblivious of the surmounting threat to her. Blades already slashed past her head, but all Cyrus’s daughter did was continue to stare at Uldyssian as so many in the audience had this day.

“I have faith in you,” she declared. “I do—”

An ax already scarred from heavy use neatly severed her head. Blood poured forth like a fountain from the open neck. As Serenthia’s head toppled over, Uldyssian saw that the look of trust yet remained.

“Serry!” he choked. Uldyssian tried to push forward, but a hand suddenly pulled him back. He looked at the one preventing him from reaching her and discovered it to be none other than his own brother...but a Mendeln of the likes of which made him shiver.

“Do not worry about her anymore,” the cadaverous figure intoned without emotion. Mendeln’s face was drawn and gray and he seemed half-shadow. A dark cloak surrounded him, a cloak that twisted and turned despite no apparent wind. “Do not worry about her, anymore. She’s one of mine, now.”

Only then did Uldyssian see that there were figures behind Mendeln, faces he recognized from both Partha and Seram. However, they, like Mendeln, had drawn faces and, when he looked close, jagged wounds and torn flesh.

They were all dead.

Having made his declaration, Mendeln drifted past Uldyssian as if a shade himself. In his wake, the corpses of the innocent rose to follow. The fighting separated around Serenthia’s body, which still stood despite its death.

Mendeln gestured and the torso also turned to join him.

“Wait!” called Achilios, leaping forward. Throwing down his bow, he seized Serenthia’s bleeding head and rushed after Mendeln. “Wait!”

Uldyssian attempted to follow, but for him the battling legions would not make room. The winged warriors and their bestial adversaries pressed tight against one another, yet, despite heavy losses on both sides, the numbers seemed undiminished. An endless flow of replacements continued to come, filling the world to overflowing.

There was no longer even a hint of the paradise that had once stood all around Uldyssian. The ground was a blazing slaughterhouse, the sky burnt and smoke-ridden.

Then, when he had nearly given up hope, he heard Lylia’s voice call to him. Desperately he looked around for her, at last spotting the noblewoman—her finery gleaming—gliding toward him from across the carnage. The battle did not touch Lylia in the least; in fact, the

combatants seemed eager to be out of her way. She ran directly into Uldyssian's arms, holding him as tight as he held her.

"Lylia..." he gasped, relieved beyond belief. "Lylia...I thought I'd lost you, too..."

"But you will never be without me, my love, never..." she cooed, holding him tighter yet. Her face was planted in his chest. "We are bound to each other forever..."

Grateful, Uldyssian leaned down to kiss her. Lylia raised her face to his—

Choking, he tried in vain to disengage from the noblewoman, but Lylia's embrace was unbreakable. Uldyssian stared in horror as her mouth moved closer to his.

"Will you not kiss me, my love?" she asked with a smile...a smile filled with sharp teeth. Her eyes had no pupils, merely a sinister shade of crimson covering the entire area under the lids. Her skin was scaled and her ears beneath her hair long and pointed. That hair still hung long, but now consisted of harsh quills colored emerald green.

Despite the macabre changes, there was that about her that still filled Uldyssian with desire, a desire so deep that it frightened him. The grand dress that she had worn was gone, utterly gone, and although similar scales covered her flesh, they did not hide what the human garments had often hinted of.

"No!" he blurted, shoving her back with all his might. "No!"

Lylia laughed at his antics. Her tail, which ended in three daggerlike projections, slapped merrily against the bloody soil. She took a step back on hooved legs like those of the goats Uldyssian had kept on the farm and displayed herself fully for his wide eyes.

"Am I not everything you dreamed? Am I not all you desire?" The demonic woman laughed again and even though that laugh sent chills through the hapless farmer, it also heightened his desire for her. "Come, my love," Lylia continued, her clawed hands inviting him toward her. "Come...you are mine, body and soul, soul and body... come to me..."

As she said this, the armies suddenly halted their struggle and turned to face Uldyssian. They marched slowly toward him, their steps matching the rhythm of Lylia's voice.

"...body and soul...soul and body...body and—"

With a wordless cry, Uldyssian woke up. He twisted to the side to find Lylia stretched over him, her face—her beautiful face—filled with concern.

"Uldyssian, my love! Are you ill?"

"I saw—the others—you—" Planting his face in his hands, he slowly pulled himself together. "I dreamed...dreamed. That's all.

Nothing but a bad dream.”

“A nightmare?” Lylia reached a smooth—unclawed—hand to his cheek. Uldyssian instinctively flinched, recalling her appearance in the vision. “And what a horrible nightmare it must have been,” she added. “if it makes you so afraid of me!”

“Lylia...I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, letting her loose blond hair cascade around her naked form. Even shadowed by the darkness, she was arresting. Desire again filled Uldyssian and the foul dream began to slip into forgetfulness.

Snaking her delicate arms around him, Lylia whispered, “Let me help ease your mind, let you see that you have nothing to fear from me...”

“Lylia, I—”

“Hush!”

Their lips met and stayed that way until Uldyssian was well out of breath. As he inhaled, the noblewoman giggled, a sound not only extremely pleasant, but not at all like the seductive yet mocking laughter of the nightmare.

“And that is just for the beginning, I promise you.” Her hands caressed his arms, ran over the hair on his chest, and worked their way down.

The last vestiges of the dream faded. With a playful growl, Uldyssian lunged forward and filled his arms with her. The two of them rolled to the other side, where the son of Diomedes worked relentlessly to make certain that no memories of the vision would ever return...

When Uldyssian again slept, it was in a mood that could only bring to him enjoyable dreams, not nightmares. With lusty snores, he lay on his stomach, one arm draped casually over Lylia.

But Lylia did not sleep. Lying on her back, she stared without blinking at some place in her own memory, a place far from the bed and Uldyssian.

There were many among Humanity who believed that dreams were portents and Lylia knew that they were not far from the truth. Dreams *could* be portents; she knew that better than most. Throughout their lovemaking, Lylia had managed to gather little snippets that Uldyssian did not even realize he mentioned. Those combined to create a vision that had caused her at one point to nearly forget herself. Fortunately, her powers had quickly healed what would have under other circumstances left the farmer with a deep and hideous scar on his

back.

Yes, dreams could be portents and there was that possible aspect to Uldyssian's. However, there was another reason for them, one that concerned Lylia far more.

Dreams—and nightmares, especially—could be *warnings*, too.

Lylia knew just what those warnings concerned. What she did not know was the source. She had done her utmost to veil her presence to those who would recognize it. To be sure, they now had their suspicions, but they, too, had to tread carefully. To not do so would reveal the entire situation to the High Heavens. No one, not even *he*, desired them to discover Sanctuary's existence.

Which still left her at the advantage, at least as far as she could see.

But this dream continued to disturb her. It did not sound like an attempt by any of those who would seek to prevent her from fulfilling her goal...yet, what else could it be?

It does not matter, she told herself. She was mistress of this situation. She was the one who had awakened the power of the nephalem in the fool beside her and through him she would raise it up in *every* mortal possible. Nothing would stand in her way.

And if Uldyssian ul-Diomed failed at some point to remain a docile puppet, then Lylia would simply *kill* him and find another dupe. After all, there were so *many* men...

FOURTEEN

Four more days passed in Partha, days in which Uldyssian became ever more comfortable with his surroundings. Kehjan remained a focus of the future, but that future stretched further ahead with each passing day.

In addition to the townsfolk, others from the farmlands and smaller communities within a day's ride began filtering in, the news spread to them by those who had already been touched. Naturally, Uldyssian greeted each newcomer and did what he could. Although progress was slow, at least now he had proof that what he had told them was true; in addition to Romus, nearly two dozen others had manifested some sign of powers. Those signs varied wildly, from healing minor injuries or causing flowers to blossom to a child's sudden ability to call birds to her hand. No two were exactly the same. That in itself fascinated Uldyssian further and he spent some of his time trying to decipher why what worked for one did not for another.

He suffered no repeat of the nightmare and, with matters demanding so much of him, soon even forgot it. Meanwhile, the ranks now swelled in another, unexpected manner. Partha was a trading town and so visitors and merchants en route elsewhere would stop there on a daily basis. They could not help but be swept up in the excitement going on all around them and many who came merely out of curiosity left touched by Uldyssian. Not all did, of course, even as not all in Partha had yet. However, the reluctant shrank in numbers with each new "miracle," such as the elderly man whose daughter healed his failing vision, initially without even realizing it. Again, it was an act she could not repeat, but Uldyssian could not help thinking that many more were on the threshold of joining him.

Despite the monumental change going on inside them, most of the townsfolk tried to continue their normal lives. What else *were* they supposed to do? Crops still had to be harvested and children fed. Master Ethon freely admitted that he enjoyed his own work, especially since the death of his wife several years earlier and the departure of his two older sons for Kehjan the season before.

In fact, it was because of that enjoyment that he had to abandon his guests come the following evening. "I will be apologizing to you, good Uldyssian, for my absence tonight. An old friend and fellow merchant would have me visit his caravan to show me some of his latest items!

Like me, he had been touched, but, also like me...well, he, too, is a merchant at heart!"

"There's no need to apologize, Master Ethon. You've been more than generous. You've done so much."

"I? I?" The older man laughed. "Oh, Uldyssian, you are likely the most *humble* person I've ever known! *I've* done so much! You've merely altered forever the lives of everyone here!"

Ethon left still laughing and with Uldyssian feeling somewhat embarrassed.

Lydia later sought to sooth Uldyssian's feelings. "You should be full of cheer! You are just being yourself, my love! Nothing to be ashamed about!" She kissed him. "But it is true, you are wonderfully humble, considering the truth."

"Perhaps..." He suddenly felt restless. "I need to walk."

"Where shall we go?"

His discomfort increasing, Uldyssian replied, "I'd like to walk alone, Lydia."

"In Partha?" She sounded amused. "I daresay you will not get very far, dear Uldyssian, but I shall let you try. I wish you the best of luck."

He knew what she meant. The moment even one person sighted him, a crowd would form as if by magic. Still, nighttime was his best opportunity. Most people would have by now returned to their homes. The inns and taverns would still be open, but Uldyssian intended to avoid those areas.

"I'll just walk down the street to the right side of the estate, then probably return right after that."

"Poor Uldyssian! You do not have to tell me everything you do!" Lydia gave him another, lengthier kiss. "I wish you a relaxing excursion!"

From anyone else, he would have thought such a reply hinting of mockery, but from her Uldyssian sensed only concern and love. Not for the first time did he think how fortunate he had been to find her. It was almost as if Fate had planned it.

With yet an even more passionate third kiss, he left her in Master Ethon's study. Uldyssian was tempted to first locate his brother, but suspected that, as in previous tries, he would not find Mendeln around. While everything else seemed to be coming together, Mendeln and he continued to grow more distant from one another. What made the situation worse was that the few times when Uldyssian might have been able to talk with his sibling, he was without exception interrupted by new supplicants. Unwilling to turn down such requests, he had let the precious chances slip away.

But there's got to come a time. Mendeln was not well. Uldyssian felt

certain of that. The younger brother was hiding something important. What it was, perhaps only Achilios knew, but the hunter was also good at being absent when Uldyssian sought to confront him. Even Serenthia's presence at the gatherings did not seem to keep Achilios nearby.

Not for the first time, Uldyssian swore to himself that all that would change as soon as possible. Somehow, he would find out the truth. For now, though, he needed to clear his own head and relax.

The night air helped him almost immediately. As he reached the outer gates, Ethon's men silently saluted him. Like so many, they had experienced the awakening within, but still felt most comfortable keeping their normal routine. Fortunately, they also already knew to respect Uldyssian's privacy.

"I won't be long," he told them.

"As you wish, Master Uldyssian. We will be here for you when you return."

He had given up trying to make them or anyone else cease calling him by such a title. Better that, at least, than being declared a "holy one" or the like, as some still did.

He chose the least lit avenue and quickly headed into it. The darkness comforted him, its shadowy veil giving Uldyssian a sense of anonymity that he truly needed at the moment. He began to think of his farm, surely either in utter disarray or in the hands of some opportunistic neighbor who had recognized the value of its soil. Uldyssian hoped that at least someone had taken care of the animals properly.

Faint voices warned him of someone coming from the other direction. Preferring to be alone, Uldyssian turned down an even darker side street and hurried off before the others would see him. What little he could make out of the tone of conversation indicated that they were merely two members of the Partha Guard making their rounds, but even they represented too much interaction with the townsfolk at this point.

Uldyssian had no idea where the new street went, but its seductive solitude was enough to keep him on it for some distance. The voices soon faded behind him. He began to relax as not even sleep could help him do. For the first time since before the calamity in Seram, the son of Diomedes felt like an ordinary man again.

Then, another voice, this one whispering, caught his attention. Uldyssian looked to the left, where he thought the source lay.

But from his right came a second whisper. Like the first, it was just low enough to be unintelligible. There was something about its tone, however, that raised his hackles.

“Who’s there?” Uldyssian called. “Who’s there?”

From the left, the first voice began anew. Wasting no more breath, Uldyssian leapt toward the sound...but his groping hands found only shadow.

A *third* voice came from somewhere ahead. With a growl, Uldyssian whirled in that direction...and once more nothing of substance could be found.

Carefully, he retreated several steps, then glanced over his shoulder. There should have been some glimpse of another street a short distance back, but Uldyssian saw only darkness.

Suddenly, *all* the voices renewed their mad muttering. Worse, now they were quickly joined by several more, all speaking in the same intense tone that set Uldyssian’s nerve on edge. He spun around in a circle, seeking either one of the speakers or an exit, but finding neither.

“Show yourself, damn it!” he finally shouted. “Show yourself!”

He tried to summon the power to his command...and failed. Trying a different tack, Uldyssian specifically imagined bright illumination—the better to ferret out his stalkers—or even some great wind that would carry him away from this area. Yet, these, too, came to nothing.

Nothing...

One voice suddenly seemed to come from right by his ear. He started to turn toward it...and a thick limb from the opposing direction wrapped around his throat.

Choking, Uldyssian struggled to free himself from whatever had snared him. He could not even tell if it was an arm or some sort of tentacle, only that its grip was stronger than iron.

As the lack of air took its toll on him, Uldyssian’s thoughts went to Lylia. He could only assume that this attack had to do with Malic and so he feared that the high priest would next go after her. Yet, even that concern did not give him the might to escape—

Then, from out of nowhere there came a hiss, followed by a snarl like that from the throat of a foul beast. At the same time, some instinct took over in Uldyssian. Every muscle in his body tensed.

The air rippled. A guttural exclamation filled the night, followed immediately by a crash.

The tightness around Uldyssian’s throat vanished, along with it the insidious whispering. Suddenly, there was only the sound of him trying to catch his breath, that, and the soft padding of swift boots.

“Uldyssian!” came a voice very familiar to him. “Uldyssian! I thought I saw...damn! I don’t know *what* I saw...”

But, despite that little obstacle, Achilios had evidently managed a masterly shot. In the blackness, it could have just as easily been

Uldyssian whom he hit and certainly that would have been a high probability had it been any other archer. However, Uldyssian knew his childhood friend's skill well and so understood that his life had never been in danger, at least from an arrow.

"Th-Thank you..." he gasped.

Achilios, bow over his shoulder, helped Uldyssian straighten. "Don't thank me for anything. I'm sorry I didn't manage to kill whatever had you...though I'm damned if I know why not! I had it or him right where the back of the neck should've been! If it was an assassin, he should lie dead at our feet right now." Making certain that Uldyssian could stand on his own, the hunter knelt. A moment later, Achilios muttered, "There's something here, but it doesn't feel like *blood*. Not fresh, anyway. Couldn't be from your attacker..."

Recalling all too well the sort of fiends that had been so far thrown against him, Uldyssian was not so certain. For the moment, though, he would trust Achilios's knowledge.

Rising, the lithe figure rushed off in the direction of the crash. A minute later, Achilios returned, what little was visible of his expression revealing his disgruntlement.

"Something heavy struck the side of that building," he said, gesturing at the darkness from which he had come. "Cracked it good... but whatever it was got up right after and ran off."

That, too, did not surprise Uldyssian. Malic would have sent servants far more capable than the previous ones. They had planned their little trap better this time, waiting for him to venture out on his own. The high priest had read him well. He had known that his prey would eventually seek private time.

Then it occurred to him to wonder just what the archer was doing here, too. Uldyssian had long given up believing in coincidence.

But before he could ask, Achilios said, "I'd suggest we leave this area for somewhere a little more populated. You might enjoy your privacy, but surely not *that* much, anymore."

With a nod, Uldyssian followed his friend back the way they had come. Achilios apparently could see in the dark much better than him. The hunter soon had them back in the vicinity of Master Ethon's house. Only then did both pause to breathe normally.

"Much better," commented the blond man.

"Thank you again," Uldyssian returned. "Now tell me how you happened to be right there when I needed your help."

Achilios cocked his head. "And why *did* you need my help, Uldyssian? What happened to you back there?"

Uldyssian would not let the questioning turn to him, not just yet. "Answer me, Achilios."

There was a long hesitation, then, “I *thought* you were going to be in danger.”

His phrasing left Uldyssian puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I just had a feeling that something was going to happen and so I followed a hunch. That’s all.”

“And managed to follow it all the way to where I was.”

The archer shrugged. “It’s nothing new. Just an instinct, Father would’ve said.” Achilios’s father had been a hunter like him, one whose reputation had never been dwarfed until his own son. “What makes me a good hunter, I guess.”

But Uldyssian was thinking that it was much more than merely an instinct. He refrained from saying anything, yet suspected that Achilios had turned the very same gift that Uldyssian carried into something honed to his particular talents. More to the point, it was possible that the archer’s family had been doing so for at least two generations.

That meant that there was more to the powers growing within them than even he had believed. Uldyssian realized that he was likely not even the first to learn of the gift, merely the first to understand that it was something astonishing.

“What *was* that thing back there?” Achilios asked. “Did you see it?”

Deciding not to pursue Achilios’s situation—for the time being, at least—Uldyssian replied, “A pet of the high priest’s, I’d say.” He considered further, then added, “It wore the guise of a man, I think. I also thought I felt armor.”

“Well, my arrow didn’t hit armor. I heard a healthy strike. It should’ve done more damage...”

Uldyssian did not care about that. He had something far more important on his mind. This attack, so deep within Partha, had made him determined to do something. “Achilios, I’ve a favor to ask you. Promise me that you’ll do it.”

“Not until I hear what it is, old friend! You know me better than that!”

“Then listen carefully and think even *more* carefully. Achilios, you’re the only one I can trust to do this. I’ve decided that the others are only in danger here. I need you to lead them to somewhere *far* away from me. Will you do that?”

“When you say the others, you mean specially Lylia, I presume?”

“All of you...but, yes, I hope you can help her, obviously.”

Achilios glanced around to see if anyone was nearby. However, the streets were empty. “I understand why you would want Lylia, Serry, and Mendeln away from here...and you know that I most of all want Serry to be safe.”

“Achilios—”

The hunter waved him to silence. “I can never be you in her eyes, but I live with that. Still, even though we agree that they shouldn’t be here—and I understand that you’d like me safe, too, naturally,” he added with a chuckle. “I know that not *one* of them would agree to go. Not even your brother. They’d fight me, fight you, Uldyssian.”

“This isn’t safe for any of you! You’ve the proof of that tonight!”

“Aye, and telling them of it would just make them all that more stubborn...which I can’t say I blame them for! You won’t be getting rid of them or me, old friend! There’s no way...”

But there *was* one way, Uldyssian thought. The worst way of all.

Although he knew the futility of continuing the argument, Uldyssian opened his mouth to try...only to shut it at the sound of hooves. Both men immediately tensed, Achilios freeing his bow.

However, the figure riding out of the black street turned out to be none other than Master Ethon. The merchant sighted the two men and reined his horse to a halt just before them.

“Uldyssian. Archer. What causes you pair to stand out here, looking so filled with distrust?”

Achilios grinned. “Just nerves, Master Ethon! Just nerves, that’s all!”

With a quick nod, the son of Diomedes agreed. “I needed a breath of air.”

“And I am not surprised about that.” The older man dismounted. Reins in one hand, he slapped Uldyssian on the shoulder with the other. “Much you have done, Uldyssian ul-Diomed! Much you have done...” He hesitated, then added, “And if there is *anything* I can do to be of service to you beyond what I already have, please do not hesitate to come to me.”

Uldyssian felt embarrassment. Fortunately, Ethon unexpectedly turned his attention to Achilios. “Have I told you what a fine bow that is, archer? I have had my eye on it since first I saw it.”

“’Twas my father’s, Master Ethon! He kept it as good as the day it was carved and I’ve done my utmost to see it stays like that! Half a man’s skill depends on the bow he wields...”

“So much, you think? May I hold it?” the merchant asked, extending a hand.

“By all means.” Achilios let their host inspect the weapon. Ethon ran his fingers expertly over the finely crafted piece. Uldyssian, who himself had admired and even fired the weapon several times over the years, saw it anew. Few there were who could have surpassed the work of Tremas, Achilios’s father.

But had Tremas’s exceptional talent with carving *also* been some

variation?

After giving the bow a very thorough inspection, Master Ethon finally returned it to its owner. "A splendid piece, yes. I look forward to seeing it in action again."

His comment caused the other two to briefly exchange glances. The leader of Partha had no idea just what he was asking. Uldyssian felt certain that the attack in the street had just been the very beginning of something far more sinister...something that could engulf the entire town.

Something that could very well *destroy* it and everyone within...

The sheep poured out of the temple, unaware that they were one step closer to losing their souls...and more...to Lucion.

No...not to him, the Primus quickly thought, his pious expression hiding sudden concern. Rather, to the greater glory of his father and the other Prime Evils.

Yet, the son of Mephisto did not mind basking in the reflection of that glory.

But for that to continue, for the eventual control of Sanctuary to happen, all had to proceed as Lucion had planned it...and recent events no longer guaranteed that such would happen. Matters had to be set properly back in place. For a demon, Lucion was a very orderly being. He liked things just so.

The other two high priests, Herodius and Balthazar, came up to him and bowed respectfully. Generally, after the Primus had given a sermon to all three orders, he and his most loyal followers met in private for further discussion of the Triune's progress toward domination.

Not this evening, however. Lucion had to focus on restoring the situation. While his servants were useful, when it came to the planning, he relied most on himself.

"We will speak together tomorrow eve, come the moon. Go and see to your duties..." Those duties included indoctrinating the faithful who had reached the point where they had begun to turn to the true doctrines of the Temple...Hate, Destruction, and Terror. The methods by which the Primus and his servants slowly manipulated the fools toward that end were many and ranged from the mundane to the magical. Some of the faithful were more attuned to this—the *weak-minded* ones—and they were carefully picked out of the throngs and invited to special sermons. There, the subtle shapings of the Primus's private sermons delved deep within the mortals' minds, seeking that which lay in the darkest recesses.

But Lucion could rely on the two humans before him to handle such matters for a time. He dismissed them and hurried back to his private sanctum. It galled him that he had to do his work in secret, but some sacrifices had to be made...especially if *she* was indeed involved. Malic's efforts would make for a good distraction in that regard, causing her to be unaware of what Lucion also intended.

The four guards snapped to attention as he passed them. They wore the semblances of Peace Warders, but were morlu. Anyone foolish enough to attempt entry without permission would quickly learn the difference...a moment before they were cut to pieces.

Shadows filled the chamber, Lucion's work now more suited for the dark. He looked to where two more morlu stood sentry over a cowering young man in the gray garb of a novice cleric. In the first part of their study, those chosen by the high priests did not wear the robes of any order, for it was by the Primus's decision which one they would best serve.

"Ikarion..." Lucion intoned. He wore his most kindly expression, which was lost on the youth in front of him, who knew who and what his master was.

"G-Great is my lord," Ikarion stammered, going down on one knee. "Merciful is m-my lord..."

This brought a chuckle from the Primus, who knew himself much better than the mortal obviously did. He reached down to the kneeling figure, stroking the chin of his chosen. "Dear Ikarion. You know the sacrifices you make to take on the mantle of a cleric, do you not?"

"And I have accepted them gratefully!"

"Have you? Your sisters were to be brought to us, to be made our loyal handmaidens..." Lucion had a very earthy taste for human women, especially untried ones. It was a mark of how devoted his acolytes were that they willingly sold their own to prove their love for him. "But they appear to have left for a long journey..."

"Master, I—"

The hand that stroked the chin now painfully clamped the mouth shut. Still speaking in the same kindly tones, Lucion continued, "They did not travel far, though, thanks to the very dedicated Brother Tomal, your good friend. I had the pleasure of discussing their talents with them only last night..."

"Nggh!" Ikarion made the mistake of trying to leap at his master.

One of the morlu drew his great ax and, in a single swift motion, removed the rebellious youth's head.

The head tumbled into Lucion's hand. He turned it upside down to preserve the contents. The son of Mephisto preferred to do his own slaying, but could not fault the warrior for his enthusiasm.

“Leave the carcass,” he commanded the morlu. “You are dismissed.”

The armored figures bowed and departed. Lucion paused, then glanced up at the deepest shadows above. “Astrogha! I know you watch! I have a tidbit for you...”

“And what the cost?” came a hissing voice. “What the cost, oh, Lucion?”

“Nothing you cannot afford, dog of Diablo...we shall speak of it later. Take the carcass...”

Something white and like rope shot down to where the body lay. It resembled the webbing a spider might shoot, only much, much larger, as if a creature at least as great as the son of Mephisto somehow hid in the recesses of the ceiling.

The headless body shot up, pulled by the webbing into the shadows. A moment later, there was a horrific slurping sound.

He has been bought, Lucion thought to himself. *That leaves just one more.*

With his free hand, the Primus drew a triangular symbol not unlike that of the Triune in the air. The pattern flared a savage crimson, then drifted to the floor, sealing there.

Lucion tossed Brother Ikarion’s head into the center. It landed perfectly, the bulging eyes staring up, the mouth slack as if in midscreech. Blood puddled around it, in actuality feeding the burning symbol with power.

“Gulag...I have something for you. Come and get it.”

The stone floor beneath the head began to shift as if suddenly liquid. The magical pattern remained intact, as did the stones beneath, but they rolled and twisted as if part of a turbulent sea.

Then...a gap reminiscent of a whirlpool opened up just to the right of the pattern. Although it was circular, within, one could see ridges of teeth. The “mouth” swirled around the pattern twice, then sought to engulf it.

Dark sparks arose each time it attempted. At last, the toothy gap paused.

“Stupid is Gulag,” came Astrogha’s monstrous voice from above. “Like his master he is...”

“You have your treat, arachnid,” reprimanded Lucion. “Be still...”

The demon above grew silent, save to renew the slurping that marked his eating. The macabre mouth attempted once more to take in the head and once more the pattern kept it away.

“Rise up, Gulag...”

The floor began to swell. It took on a shape vaguely humanoid, vaguely porcine. Its body still maintained the stone design of the

original floor, but approximately where the head should have been, three eyestalks suddenly sprouted.

“LLLLLuccccionnnnnnnnn...” it said, the voice akin to the last gasp of a dying man. “Wwwwaannntttt...”

“And so you shall, servant of destruction, servant of Baal, but in a moment. You and Astrogha must assist me with a spell. Will you?”

Above, the slurping ceased again. “Expensive is this meal, this one thinks now...”

Lucion’s expression grew sharp. His eyes seemed to sink into the sockets and he was suddenly half again as large as before. “You accepted it, spider, just the same. A bargain made without thought is still a bargain...”

“So it must be...” the other demon replied reluctantly.

Looking slightly more like the genial Primus again, the son of Mephisto focused on the second demon. “And you, Gulag, do you have any reservations about accepting what I offer even before hearing the price?”

“Dessssstrucctionnnnnnn?”

He smiled at the simple question. “Yes, there could very well be some.”

“Hhhheadddd...”

It was as close to an acquiescence as Lucion would get from one of Baal’s minions. He gestured at the pattern, removing it.

Gulag’s mouth suddenly expanded to nearly his entire length. The skull of Brother Ikarion tumbled into the bottomless maw, vanishing.

The demon shut his mouth, then formed a crude smile out of the stone pattern.

Lucion nodded. Steepling his fingers, he closed his eyes in thought. “Excellent. Now...this is what I seek from the two of you...”

FIFTEEN

The illusion of peace shattered, Uldyssian lived in a constant state of high concern. Malic was nearby, no doubt plotting something more heinous. As ever, Uldyssian did not fear for himself so much as he did Lylia and the others. However, as Achilios had said, they would not leave him of their own free will and he had no idea how to make them change their minds.

Noticing his darkening mood, Master Ethon pulled him aside after dinner the next evening. "You are not yourself. Does something ail you?"

"There's nothing."

The dark eyes burned into his own. "Yes, I think that there is, but you do not wish to talk now." Ethon frowned. "The other night, I offered whatever additional help I could to you. I think this is just such a situation. Perhaps, if we met alone when the others sleep, I could at the very least pass on some advice."

Since the death of his parents, Uldyssian had more or less relied on his own advice over the years, only now and then turning to the likes of Cyrus and other friends of his father. Still, the merchant had seen much and lived through more and surely had a view of matters far exceeding that of the farmer.

Uldyssian finally nodded gratefully to his host. "Thank you. I'd like that."

"Later, then," murmured Master Ethon. "Say the hour before midnight?"

Nodding again, Uldyssian returned to the company of Lylia and the others. It was all he could do from that point on to hide his impatience. The minutes took hours to pass, the hours an eternity. When at last he excused himself from Lylia—the noblewoman becoming used to his late-night walks—Uldyssian almost ran through the house, so eager was he to reach the study and pour out his concerns.

On his way, he nearly collided with a smaller figure. Cedric looked up at him, the youth's face oddly pale.

"Ced! What do you still do up?"

The boy glanced past, as if impatient to be away from the man before him. "Father...my father wanted to see me. Now I'm going to

bed.”

Already feeling late for his own meeting with Master Ethon, Uldyssian patted the merchant’s son on the shoulder. “Of course. Off you go, then.”

Without waiting for a reply from the boy, he continued on. The halls were dimly lit, only a few oil lamps marking the nighttime. Uldyssian passed no guards, the merchant obviously feeling very secure in his own domain. That would certainly change once he heard what his guest had to say.

The door to the study was closed and no light shone through the bottom. Uldyssian looked around the empty hall, then knocked once.

From within, Ethon’s voice bid him enter. Relieved, Uldyssian slipped inside, quickly shutting the door after him.

The only illumination in the room came from a single candle situated atop a small, mahogany table to the side. Next to the candle sat a decanter of wine and two goblets, one of which Uldyssian’s host—seated in a leather chair next to the table—took up even as the farmer’s eyes adjusted to the gloom.

“Tonight, I find the quiet of the night much more relaxing,” explained Master Ethon after a sip of wine. “The better to think, also.”

Uldyssian slipped into another chair that Master Ethon indicated. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“How could I not? After all that has happened? Uldyssian, I could not refuse this moment to you!” He gestured at the other goblet. “Please...I would recommend it.”

Although he wanted to keep a clear head, Uldyssian suddenly felt parched. He allowed Master Ethon to pour him some wine. The liquid flowed like delicious fire down his throat.

“A strong vintage, but one that touches the soul, I say.” Ethon put down his own goblet. “You are very troubled, my son.”

Clutching his wine in both hands, Uldyssian leaned forward and explained his concerns for his friends...and Partha itself. The older man listened quietly, nodding now and then in understanding.

When Uldyssian had finished, Master Ethon rubbed his chin in thought. The flickering candlelight danced in his eyes, catching the farmer’s attention.

“Your fears for my people and your own comrades does you justice, Uldyssian. I would hope to do no less myself in your situation...”

“But what can I do to keep them—*all* of you—from harm? I don’t know if I can protect *everyone*, not from the might of the Triune. I thought I *could* once, but after the other night...”

The leader of Partha rose and began to pace slowly in front of Uldyssian. His mind was visibly at work.

“Yes...the other night, as you describe it, shows an inconsistency in your gift I would not have expected. It was a telling moment.” Ethon paused, looking down at him. “You may be correct; what you wield might not be enough against such a force as the Temple. Their tools are legion. I have heard through trusted sources that they have fanatic warriors who make the Peace Warders seem pacifists. Some claim that these dark, armored fighters cannot even be slain by mortal means—”

His description struck home with Uldyssian. “Yes! The attacker in the street! As I said! Achilios should’ve slain him with that bolt, but it only startled him...”

The older man stepped from the vicinity of the candlelight, all but disappearing in the shadows in the far corner of the room. “So, the stories have merit. It almost makes me suggest...but, no, you would never do that.”

“What?” Uldyssian was willing to try almost anything, if it would at least protect the woman—the *people*—he loved. “Tell me!”

Master Ethon turned to face him again. If not for the fire of the candle reflecting yet again in his eyes, Uldyssian would not have been able to read *anything* of his expression. In that gaze, though, he saw determination and that strengthened his own resolve.

“There is one way to protect them...and my beloved Partha, but I feel much guilt even suggesting it.”

“Please! I won’t hold anything against you, Master Ethon! You’ve been nothing but a good friend and host!”

“Very well. It may be, my young Uldyssian, that you can only accomplish what you wish by leaving them without any notice. Leave them in the dead of night and ride out of Partha as if the hounds of the Temple are nearly upon the town. Ride out and meet with this Malic—”

Uldyssian leapt to his feet, the goblet dropping and the chair falling backward. “*What?*”

“Hear me out! Malic came for you! He wants only you! Whatever the outcome of your encounter with him, by abandoning Partha and the others, you remove them from the situation entirely! The Triune will trouble them no longer!”

The terrible thing was, what he said had not gone unconsidered by Uldyssian already. Yet, to hear it said so bluntly put a solid weight to it that pressed down hard on his heart.

But it would keep them all safe, especially Lylia...

Still, there was something else to think about. “But the high priest’s minions are already in Partha. It may be too late to undo that.”

“They watch for you. They will assuredly see you leave, even if you choose to do so this very minute. Such creatures will immediately

follow their prey...or does that not make sense?"

To Uldyssian it made dreadfully perfect sense, and yet, there was that about Master Ethon's suggestion that did not sit right with him.

But it's the only way! his mind insisted.

The merchant stood silent, letting Uldyssian battle this out himself. Leaving the others behind was the only true course of action. This was strictly between he and Malic.

"They would all follow me, you think? The creatures of the high priest, I mean?"

"I would guarantee it. To do anything to the contrary would be absurd."

That finally settled it for Uldyssian. "I've got to do it, then."

His host bowed in acknowledgment of the heaviness of his decision. "I will assist you to the best of my ability. In any way I can."

Ethon reached out a hand. Uldyssian instinctively did the same, but just before the two men could shake, a sense of urgency overtook the son of Diomedes. He pulled his hand back and stared at the merchant's eyes. There was something wrong about them...

He tore his gaze from the merchant's, suddenly needing to look toward the ceiling.

It was too late. From the darkness above, a heavy, armored form fell upon the farmer. It brought him to the floor, their combined weight cracking the boards beneath them.

"There is ever *something* that causes the best plans to somehow go awry!" snapped a voice that was not the merchant's. "I begin to wonder if it has to do with your curious and unpredictable abilities..."

Even as Uldyssian struggled against his opponent, he recognized the new voice. It was *Malic* speaking. Malic, in the guise of Master Ethon...

"All so very simple...or so it was supposed to be. Lure you out into the wild, where this could be handled without further complications. But as with last time, *nothing* can go simple where you are involved, farmer, can it?"

His face almost crushed into the floor, Uldyssian gasped, "Where—where is E-Ethon?"

"Why, right here," replied a voice that was now both Malic's and the merchant's. "Let him see," the cleric ordered Uldyssian's guard.

From behind, a thick hand grabbed the captive by his hair and pulled hard, forcing him to look up. The image of the merchant still stood before Uldyssian. "Right here, in the flesh," Ethon said, once more using the high priest's voice. The figure chuckled, then added, "Or, at least *wearing* his flesh."

He reached up and touched his cheek with the palm of his right

hand. Where the hand came in contact with the face, the skin there suddenly *dripped* as if melting. In large portions, it started sliding down to his chin, where it hung in gobbets.

Uldyssian's stomach turned. He struggled to free himself, but the monstrous warrior had him in a tight grip.

Through the macabre display, the high priest's own dark countenance began to peek out. Malic pulled his hand away, which caused the horrific melting to cease. He showed Uldyssian his palm.

Revealed there was a sight more terrible than the face, for it was no human hand that Malic had, but rather something that matched his demonic heart well. The high priest flexed what passed for fingers and it amazed Uldyssian that he had not noticed the misshapen appendage despite the disguise.

"A simple use of misdirection and illusion," explained Malic, reading his expression...or his thoughts. He thrust the limb closer. "Granted me by my master to assist in this hunt. I tested it twice before the merchant, whom the morlu caught as he was returning to his home. He was an opportunity that I could not pass up."

Uldyssian spat at the man, unfortunately coming up short with his effort. His guard—a morlu, the high priest had called him—rewarded the captive's attempt by slamming Uldyssian's face in the floor again.

"That will be enough," Malic commanded, whether to his prisoner or the guard, it was impossible to say. "Raise the fool up."

Another pair of powerful hands took hold of Uldyssian's right arm. The original morlu shifted to the left. The two armored giants held Uldyssian in viselike grips.

"Not as I originally intended, but this will do—"

The door opened. Glancing there, Uldyssian saw in horror that Cedric had returned.

"Go!" he shouted at the youth. "Run!"

But instead of obeying or at least looking fearful, Cedric ignored the warning. To Malic, he said, "The woman's not in the room."

The blood drained from Uldyssian. The voice emerging from Ethon's son was no more that of the boy than Malic's had been the merchant's.

"No..." he gasped. "No..."

"She must be there!" insisted the cleric. "I sense her there even now. The arm, too, verifies that. It is drawn to her, as the master said. You looked in the wrong room."

Cedric shook his head. With a dismissive shrug toward the gaping Uldyssian, he grunted, "This one's scent is all over the room...and the bed. Nothing of her. No smell, no trace."

Malic reconsidered. "I see. This is a wily prey. Certainly more so

than this buffoon...”

Uldyssian could not make sense of everything the pair said, but one bright point stuck out. Malic had sent this abomination—tears streaked down Uldyssian’s face as he thought of what had happened to the lad—to hunt for Lylia. That, thankfully, had so far ended in failure.

“Find her quickly, Damos,” the high priest continued. “You will leave nowhere untouched. The spell I cast will continue to muffle any sounds within the house only. Recall that at all times.”

“I will hunt her down, Great One. And she will not live long after that.” The false Cedric accented his dire statement with an animalistic snort, then left again.

Malic smiled at his captive. “We will salvage this yet, it seems. Then, you will be on your way to a long-overdue audience with the Primus.”

“They’ll not let you out of Partha, cleric!” Uldyssian snarled. “The townsfolk loved Master Ethon! They’ll stop you! They’ll tear you apart for what you’ve done!”

“But why should they stop me?” asked the malevolent figure, putting his monstrous palm to his face. As Uldyssian watched, stunned, the flesh moved to cover the revealed areas. In seconds, Malic once more completely resembled the merchant, even to the difference in height. The spell that allowed him to walk in Ethon’s flesh was an astonishing if grisly creation. “Why should they stop their dearly beloved *leader*?”

Indeed, there was no reason and Uldyssian now saw that. The guards and any bystanders would be fooled just as he had been, especially in the dark.

“She must be with one of the others,” Malic went on, turning back to the question of Lylia. “Perhaps she is already seducing one of them to take your place—”

The high priest could not have said more terrible words in front of Uldyssian. His blood boiled and a mindless rage swept over him. He shoved back in an attempt to free himself from his guards’ grips.

But instead of the few steps back, steps during which he had hoped his captors’ feet would trip, Uldyssian and the two morlu *flew* across the study.

Across the study...and through the window.

Debris rained down on Uldyssian as he and the morlu fell. Despite their predicament, the bestial warriors clung to him as if their lives depended upon doing so. Uldyssian, in turn, tried to fold himself up as much as possible, aware that the ground was not all that far.

They collided with a thud and a rush of dirt. The crack of bone

echoed in Uldyssian's ear. One of the morlu let out a rasping cry and his fingers slipped from the captive's arm.

Uldyssian immediately tried to pull free of the other warrior, but the morlu held fast. As the two rolled over, they came face to face. The night shadowed the morlu's countenance much, but not enough at such close range to prevent the son of Diomedes from seeing the black pits where the eyes should have been.

A fist in the morlu's chin did nothing. Uldyssian grabbed for the throat just as his foe did the same. The warrior's fingers all but threatened to crush his windpipe, yet, for some reason, the morlu held back.

It took Uldyssian several precious seconds to understand why. They still wanted him alive after all this. Why else try to take him in secret?

However, while that gave him some hope, he could not completely discount the morlu forgetting orders and finally simply killing the man with whom he struggled. What stared at him from within the unsettling ram-skull helmet was not human, not anymore. At any moment, his foe might become lost in bloodlust.

With all his will, Uldyssian attempted to summon the same strength that had thrown him and his two bulky adversaries so far away. Gritting his teeth, the farmer swung at his foe again, this time aiming at the only target, the heavily armored chest.

The morlu blocked his wrist, slowing the strike. Uldyssian's fist splayed open. His palm slapped lightly against the breastplate, hardly enough to do any damage.

The morlu went sinking into the ground as if a huge, invisible hammer had struck him. He sank so deep that there was not even a trace of him to see.

Another hand seized hold even as Uldyssian sought to recover. Shouts erupted from elsewhere, likely Master Ethon's guards coming to protect their employer and his property. Uldyssian wanted to warn them of Malic's horrific masquerade, but the remaining morlu, having recovered from the fall, now fell upon him in earnest.

Perhaps "recovered" was not quite the correct word, for as the warrior spun Uldyssian to face him, the son of Diomedes found himself staring at a head bent completely to the right. A good portion of the morlu's neck stuck out in an obscene and impossible manner. Yet, none of this appeared to matter to the furious creature.

Once again, fingers clamped around Uldyssian's throat. The morlu squeezed, but not enough to kill. Uldyssian's air was cut off. He knew that all his foe had to do was wait for him to pass out. Then, Malic would have his prey...and no one would be able to save Lylia.

Reaching up, Uldyssian grabbed hold of one side of the morlu's

head. Gritting his teeth, he pulled as hard as he could.

With a horrible sucking sound, the head came free.

The morlu's body shivered and the fingers released. They grasped blindly for the head, which Uldyssian pulled back.

Like something out of a ghastly puppet show, Uldyssian led the torso several steps toward the wall surrounding Master Ethon's estate. Then, with as much strength as he could muster, he threw the head over.

The torso lunged, only to collide with the wall. It repeated the attempt, but with the same results. On its third try, the headless body stumbled, then slid to the ground, where, at last, it stilled.

Exhaling, Uldyssian quickly looked back at the house. There was no sign of any activity in the study, but around the grounds, guards scurried. Two of them closed on Uldyssian.

The moment that they recognized him, the pair slowed. He gestured at the house. "Inside! There's more inside! Beware! You must cut off their heads!"

They looked at him with somewhat fearful expressions. Uldyssian did not care if they believed him. He ran past, already fearful that Malic had located Lylia...or any of the others, for that matter.

Bursting through the front doors, he stumbled over something in the dark. Twisting around on the floor, Uldyssian discovered to his horror a corpse that surely had once belonged to one of the merchant's household servants. Once again, the contents of Uldyssian's stomach threatened to come up, for the body had been completely and perfectly *flayed*.

First Ethon and his son, now this poor soul. Uldyssian was caught between revulsion and bitterness. Each of the horrible demises could be tied to him. Yet Uldyssian was not foolish enough to blame himself alone. Malic was the culprit who had done the foul work. Malic, at the bidding of the Primus.

Anger again overwhelmed him. There was nothing that Uldyssian could do about the mysterious Lucion, but he could try to see about making certain that the high priest troubled them no more, even if he had to sacrifice himself in the process.

The guards he had spoken to stopped at the entrance, the torch in the hand of one illuminating the grisly scene for them. They stared round-eyed at Uldyssian.

"Beware anyone in the house bearing a weapon or anyone with the semblance of your master and his son. If they are truly Ethon and young Cedric—" He had to choke back the emotions swelling up or else the guards would suspect the truth. "—then they will understand that you locking them away is for their own safety!"

“Lock them away?” blurted one man in surprise.

“For their own sake and yours! Trust me!”

If Uldyssian had been any other person, the men likely would have rejected his commands, but they knew of his miracles. Uldyssian cursed silently, wishing that more than a handful of people had exhibited some abilities akin to his own. At the moment, he would have been happy with Romus or Jonas at his side.

Or *Achilios*.

The archer was his only hope. Achilios had nearly slain Malic once and could have killed one of the morlu if aware how.

As the guards sought to catch their wits, Uldyssian raced up the steps to the next floor. Already he pictured Lylia lying dead in the corridor and the fear of that coming true urged him on despite his injuries and exertion.

The room he shared with her lay directly ahead. Mustering his strength, Uldyssian threw himself at the door.

With a crash, it fell open. Uldyssian immediately rolled to his feet, ready to face a hundred Malics.

But the sinister cleric was not there...and neither was Lylia. Instead, a frightened young woman huddled in the far corner. Uldyssian recognized her as one of the women Master Ethon had commanded to see to the noblewoman's needs while she was his guest..

“Where is she?” he roared, ignoring her fear. “Where is Lylia?”

The woman wordlessly pointed at a huge oak clothing cabinet. In addition to what she had been wearing on her arrival, she now had other garments procured for her by their host. The same went for all of Master Ethon's guests. The man had shown nothing but courtesy and care and what had happened to him was a true nightmare that Uldyssian would never forget.

And worse, he now feared that it had also happened to the woman he loved. Why else would the servant point at the shut cabinet and shiver with such horror?

Then, something struck a chord. A servant...a household servant...

Uldyssian recalled the false Cedric and how, despite his diminutive appearance, some spell surely hid from sight another monstrous morlu or the like.

Could it be?

He whirled around...almost too late.

It leapt across the bed at him, a thing swollen beyond the proportions of the skin it wore. Rips and tears spread through the fragile flesh and beneath them could be seen armor. The face was a contorted mask no longer fitting and even as the horrific figure fell

upon him, Uldyssian could not help but again marvel at how Malic's spellwork made size and shape of no consequence to the guise.

The two crashed into the cabinet, reducing it to splinters. Scraps of stolen skin dropping from his ghoulish countenance, the morlu raised his hand...a hand in which he now wielded a savage, curved ax.

With a grating laugh, he brought it down upon Uldyssian.

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Achilios woke with a start. He reached for his clothes, throwing them on as quickly as he could, then snatching the bow and quiver from a nearby chair. The archer heard not a sound, but something set him on edge. He crept toward the door, pausing there to listen.

At first, all was silence, but then Achilios heard faint movement, either of someone very slight or very surefooted. Looping the bow over his shoulder, he retrieved the hunting knife he always carried on his belt. Then, with the utmost caution, Achilios opened the door a crack.

The dim light of a single weak oil lamp mounted in the wall gave his expert eyes just enough illumination to see down the corridor. Someone moved at the very edge of the lit area, but not a figure tall enough to be Master Ethon or one of the household servants.

In fact...it looked like young Cedric to him.

The boy slowly moved along, pausing now and then before various doors. He stopped in front of the one leading to Serenthia's chambers, then moved on. For some reason that caused Achilios to exhale in relief.

What exactly the merchant's son was doing, the archer had no idea. There was nothing normal in Cedric's behavior. Achilios began to fear that the boy's mind might not be all right...or that, considering the events of the recent past, something or someone had control of it.

That decided it for him. Moving as silent as a cat, Achilios stepped out into the corridor. He kept the knife ready...for what, he did not know. Not to use against the poor boy, certainly. Ethon's son was an innocent.

Cedric continued to study the doors, but also peered at alcoves and even, at times, the ceiling. Achilios wondered what he expected to find above, then decided that he would prefer not to know.

Eyes well-adjusted to the dimness, the archer kept pace with his unsuspecting quarry. Achilios reached Serenthia's door. He hesitated there, leaning his ear close. Within, the soft sounds of her steady breathing reassured him that she was unharmed.

Straightening, Achilios focused on Cedric again...or would have, if the youth had been anywhere to be seen. Somehow, in the brief seconds when the archer's attention had been on Serenthia's safety, Cedric had vanished from his view.

Frowning, Achilios pushed forward. Master Ethon's son had to be somewhere ahead, unless he had managed to slip into one of the last rooms without Achilios noticing. That was highly unlikely. The hunter could not have missed such an obvious action.

But as he neared the end, it seemed to Achilios that entering a room was the *only* possibility to explain Cedric's disappearance. Yet, the most likely of the doors proved locked and surely he would have heard the rattling of the handle.

A few more steps took Achilios to the far wall. Perplexed, he ran a hand across the area, thinking that perhaps there was a hidden door. Unfortunately, he discovered nothing. The wall was very, very solid.

Then, some inner alarm made him look up at the ceiling...only to find that, while it was dark there, it was also empty of any nightmare. Achilios frowned, briefly wondering why he had suddenly felt as if danger had lurked above him.

Still perplexed by Cedric's disappearance, he turned back—

Master Ethon's son stood only a yard away from him, gazing up solemnly at the tall archer.

Achilios all but jumped. "Ced!"

"I was looking for her," the youth remarked quietly and steadily. "The one with Uldyssian."

"Lylia, you mean? Why would she—"

"Lylia," Cedric repeated, almost as if memorizing it. "Do you know where she is?"

"I'd imagine with Uldyssian, as you said, lad!" Achilios chuckled. "But I'd not disturb them now! Would probably be very inopportune!"

"She's not with him."

"And how would you know that?" For reasons he could not explain, the archer suddenly felt very cold. Achilios leaned toward the boy. "Ced, are you all—"

Master Ethon's son shoved him against the wall with such force that the hunter felt the wood crack.

Giving silent thanks that it had not been his *bones* that had made such a sound, Achilios let himself drop to the floor. Just above his head, Cedric slammed a fist into the wall, wreaking further damage in a manner impossible for one his size...or even Achilios's, for that matter.

The hunter kicked out, hoping to knock his attacker off balance, but it was as if Achilios struck solid rock. The impact vibrated through his body. Cedric appeared unaffected. In fact, Achilios could almost swear that the boy smiled at his puny effort.

As the small figure reached for him, the hunter reprimanded himself for still thinking that it was the merchant's son with whom he

battled. This was not Cedric; this was possibly not even anything human. Achilios recalled too well the demons in the wild. Surely, this had to be one of them.

With an agility born from keeping on the trails of the most wily animals, Achilios managed to avoid the grasping hands. He shoved himself forward, slipping past the false Cedric.

Unfortunately, as the hunter tried to get to his feet, one hand finally snagged him by the collar. With a triumphant grunt, Cedric threw Achilios down the corridor.

Achilios landed hard, but the sound of his collision was oddly muffled. He doubted that anyone other than he could have even heard it. Clearly another spell at work and one which concerned Achilios as much as the creature masquerading as the boy. It meant that an army—led by the high priest Malic, of course—could walk the entire house and no one would even know until it was too late.

The villains would be after Uldyssian. It was possible that they even had him captive already. But why, then, would they want Lylia? He could only assume that either he was wrong and his friend had escaped the high priest's grasp—which meant that they wanted to use the noblewoman for bait—or Uldyssian *was* a prisoner as Achilios had first supposed and Lylia was to be used to force him to remain compliant.

But whatever the reason, she had not been with him. Achilios gave thanks for that stroke of luck even as he scurried to his feet to avoid being fallen upon by his assailant. Her escape meant there remained some hope.

He had no more time to concern himself with Uldyssian and Lylia, for suddenly Cedric wielded in his hand a pair of vicious swords nearly the length of his body. Achilios had no idea where those weapons had come from, but the creature used them with tremendous skill, cutting arcs in the air and through a wooden railing too near. Fragments of wood went flying.

There was also something *else* different about the figure before Achilios. He was larger, bloated, as if something sought to burst free from under the skin. The cold Achilios had felt within grew worse as he imagined the fate of the boy whom he had befriended, the boy who had wanted to be an expert hunter like him.

Jagged tears spread all over Cedric's face and form. The right side near the jaw snapped away, revealing underneath something as pale as death and clad in black metal. What had once been Master Ethon's son now stood nearly as tall as Achilios and wider yet.

And even as the transformation took place, the blades came at the archer. Achilios dodged one after another, barely even able to draw a

breath between leaps. Most other men would have long been cut to shreds and he knew that one lapse would see him dead. His concern was not so much for himself as it was for the rest and he worried what would happen to Serenthia and Mendeln if he failed. He dared not even warn them for fear that they would step out of their rooms and be slain. For that matter, it was possible that they might not even be able to hear his cry, if what he suspected about a spell was true.

One of the blades sank deep into the rail again, this time momentarily catching. The hesitation was all Achilios needed. His knife he had lost when smashed against the wall, but with practiced ease, the archer slipped free his bow and notched an arrow. At such a range, he could hardly miss, but the exact target was what mattered. This was surely a fiend similar to what had attacked Uldyssian in the street and so merely firing for a vital spot would not necessarily work. In fact, there was only one place Achilios was fairly sure would have an effect.

All this went through his mind in the matter of a single second. In the next, Achilios fired, aiming for one of the eyes. They now had an ominous darkness to them, as if there were no pupils, merely sockets. Still, the thing *had* to see...

He should have easily hit the spot. Even the creature seemed to think that, for it moved the twin blades up to protect the face. Yet, not only did the arrow miss the area of the eye, it flew entirely against all logic, burying itself deep in the wall *beside* his foe.

The bestial figure laughed. It tore away the last of poor Cedric's countenance and, as it did, it expanded in height and girth again, becoming an armored giant upon whose head was a macabre helmet that looked like an animal skull.

Swearing, Achilios stumbled back a step and notched another arrow. Keeping the last bolt's direction in mind, he fired again.

This time, it bounced off the armored shoulder.

The fearsome warrior grinned. "Not so good," he mocked in a voice that sent shivers through Achilios, for it sounded of the grave and reminded the archer of that moment when he had touched the stone near Seram. "Not so good for you..."

The blades came like twin whirlwinds. This time, Achilios moved too slowly. One cut into his thigh. He let out a cry and fell to the floor.

"You would make a good morlu," the armored behemoth grated. "Not as good as I, Damos, but still good. Maybe I bring your body back for the master..."

He raised both swords—

From behind Damos, someone quietly spoke. Achilios thought that

he recognized the voice and yet, at the same time, there was that about it that made it sound as unnatural as when the morlu had spoken.

The huge warrior jerked as if a puppet tugged by the strings. With a hiss, he spun to face whoever stood there. Achilios reached for his bow, but did not know where to fire. The only open area was near the neck, a target where his arrow had failed to slay last time.

“Who are you?” demanded Damos. “What is it you speak?”

The other said something in a tongue Achilios did not recognize.

The morlu let out a howl. He doubled over, dropping one of the swords.

“Stop it! Stop!” Damos lunged with the remaining weapon, only to come up short. He gasped, then fell to one knee. The second sword joined its brother.

The dark figure beyond the morlu uttered a single syllable.

Damos let out a howl. His body shivered. A stench suddenly arose from the morlu’s direction, a carrion smell.

With a last, mournful sound, the armored giant collapsed in an ungainly pile. The stench grew stronger.

Covering his nose and mouth, Achilios stared at the one standing over the body.

“*Mendeln?*”

Uldyssian’s brother stared at Achilios as if seeing *through* him. There was a presence around Mendeln that made the hunter shiver almost as much as when he had realized what had become of Cedric. It was not evil, but so *different*, and it once more put Achilios in mind of the stone and what he had felt.

“*Kyr i’ Trag ’oul discay,*” Mendeln finally said to him, as if this gibberish explained everything.

Rising, Achilios glanced at the morlu. From the smell and what he could glimpse, he would have sworn that the creature had been dead for many days, even weeks. The flesh almost seemed to be putrefying before his very eyes.

He looked again at Mendeln, pale as the corpse. The younger brother suddenly blinked. Life returned to his expression, followed a moment later by utter bewilderment and horror at the tableau before him.

“Achilios...what...where...?”

At that moment, the house filled with noise. There was a crash and voices both below and nearby. A tremendous thud came from the direction of the chambers shared by Uldyssian and Lylia, a place that the archer had assumed vacant from the false Cedric’s remarks.

A door nearby flung open and Serenthia, a dressing gown given to

her by Master Ethon closed tightly around her throat, burst out. She saw Achilios first, then Mendeln, and finally noticed the grisly form on the floor. To her credit, the trader's daughter smothered a cry and instead immediately asked, "Where's Uldyssian and Lylia? Are they all right?"

Before Achilios could answer, there came another crash, this one from the very direction of Uldyssian's chambers. The hunter spun about and headed toward the noise. As Serenthia started to follow, he shouted, "You two stay! Do as I say!"

He had no idea whether they obeyed or not, but hoped that at least Mendeln would have the good sense to keep Cyrus's daughter out of danger. How Mendeln had done what he had to the vicious morlu, Achilios did not understand—nor did he understand *exactly* what had happened to the creature—but hopefully that same power would come into play if they were attacked. There was no telling how many more of the foul warriors there still were.

Two guards raced up the steps, obviously heading for the same destination. The first to reach the door gripped the handle—

From the chamber *next* to Uldyssian's, the massive form of a morlu burst through into the hall. He rammed into the two startled guards, sending one falling down the stairs. The second tried to turn to fight, but the monstrous warrior cut through his chest with an ax, spilling blood everywhere. The corpse went tumbling back, the eyes of the hapless guard ending up staring at Achilios.

The archer already had his bow unslung and ready to fire, but he remained well aware how his previous attempts had failed. With a swift calculation honed by having to adjust for wind and the sudden darting of animals, he finally released the arrow.

By all logic, the bolt should have flown far past his target, but it swerved at the last, just as Achilios hoped. He was certain that some spell had been cast on his weapon, although when that might have happened, he could not say. The only one other than him to touch it of late had been Uldyssian and Master Ethon...

The shaft buried itself exactly where he hoped. The morlu let out a howl as he reached to pluck the arrow from one of the dark eye sockets.

Achilios had a second shot ready by then. He fired immediately and watched with grim satisfaction as the new arrow hit directly in the other socket.

The armored behemoth slumped to his knees. The hand pulling at the first arrow dropped loosely to the floor, followed by the one wielding the bloody ax. Yet, the morlu did not completely collapse.

Racing up to the fiendish warrior, Achilios snagged the ax. The

morlu weakly sought to grab at him. The hunter dodged, then, bowed over his shoulder, raised the ax high.

A moment later, he let it sink deep into the morlu's neck, cutting the head off cleanly. Only then did the body fall forward.

Keeping the ax ready, Achilios looked to Uldyssian's door. To his dismay, Serenthia—a sharp, broken piece of railing in one hand—already stood there, Mendeln on her heels.

“I told you to stay—”

Heedless of his warning, she flung open the door. Achilios leaped after her, fearful for her life.

As they entered, it was to see Uldyssian and another morlu with their hands around one another's throat. Serenthia let out a gasp, then ran up behind the morlu. Achilios expected her to try to club him with the piece of wood, but instead she turned it point first and aimed for the back of the neck.

By right, it should have cracked harmlessly or, at most, caused some shallow wound. Yet, as Serenthia thrust with all her might, the point flared white...and sank into the morlu's flesh with the utmost ease.

Uldyssian's adversary hacked. Releasing his hold, the morlu tried to pull the rail free. He fell to his knees, clutching desperately at it.

Serenthia stepped back, obviously awed by what she had done. Uldyssian, on the other hand, simply bent down over the morlu, then seized the wood. With powerful effort, he twisted it so that he nearly tore the head off.

The morlu dropped.

“The head...the head is the key,” Uldyssian declared. “The head...” He looked up. “Lylia! Is she with you?”

“No!” Serenthia quickly responded.

“One of these creatures was looking for her,” Achilios added. “He seemed to be having no luck in this area.”

“I don't understand, unless—” He pushed past them, shouting, “She must've gone to look for me! She must've headed to the study...where I last left Malic!”

Mendeln did not follow after his brother and the others as they rushed to rescue the noblewoman. It was not that he did not wish to help, but something made him pause and look again at the morlu, both the one just slain and the other in the hall. A sense of foreboding rose within him as he moved to the nearest. He almost felt that, despite appearances, some spark of animation—not life—remained in the hideous corpse.

Without knowing why, he stretched a hand out over the back of the body. In his head, symbols appeared. This time Mendeln had some vague understanding of what they meant and, as with times previous, their pronunciation was obvious to him.

As he said the words, he felt a coolness emanate from his downturned palm. A faint glow like moonlight shone down on the region below his hand.

The morlu's body shivered, almost as if intending to rise again. It was all Mendeln could do to keep from pulling away. Yet some inner sense warned him that if he did, it might prove catastrophic.

The morlu's corpse shook violently. Then, a black cloud no larger than an apple rose from the body. It hovered briefly, then drifted up into his palm...where it promptly dissipated.

The morlu stilled again. The corpse looked as if it had deflated some. Mendeln no longer sensed anything.

He went to the one in the corridor and performed the same ritual. Glancing over his shoulder, Mendeln eyed the first one that he had encountered with Achilios. He could still not recall how he had gone from his bed to the hall and why that morlu had fallen at his feet. All that Mendeln knew for certain was that he had uttered words to that one, which made it unnecessary to perform the ritual used on the pair.

Curiously, Mendeln also suddenly recalled that he had not felt alone when he had dealt with that creature. He could have sworn that there had been a figure behind him, someone who had first whispered the needed words just in time.

But who? Mendeln asked himself. *Who?*

Then he remembered that there might be more of the helmed warriors, either those in wait or those believed dead. Whichever the case, Mendeln knew that he had to see to each one of them, make certain that the ritual was done. Only then could it be insured that none would rise again...

Shivering at the thought, Uldyssian's brother hurried along.

It had to be the study. Somehow, Uldyssian knew that Lylia had gone there. She would have entered without hesitation, certain that her love and Master Ethon were inside, discussing some matter.

Malic would take her, then, use her as leverage against the son of Diomedes. He knew that Uldyssian would do anything to save her from harm.

Uldyssian's blood suddenly boiled. But if she was harmed...

The doors to the study were shut. That seemed very odd considering that now household servants and guards ran all through

the building, trying to make sense of what had happened. That none of them had gone to the study in search of their employer boded ill, for it smelled of the cleric's manipulations.

His thoughts growing more turbulent, Uldyssian threw himself at the entrance.

The doors crashed open, one flinging back so hard that it broke off. Uldyssian landed on the floor, immediately rolling to his feet and trying to muster whatever he could from within.

"Malic!" he roared, awaiting the worst. "This is between you and—"

But as he drank in the sight before him, Uldyssian faltered. There was another morlu in the center of the study, his head cleanly separated from his body and a dark, burnt area across his chest. The head, still within the ram's-skull helmet, seemed to peer angrily at the ceiling.

That scene, though, was nothing compared with what lay sprawled a little farther inside. It was another corpse stripped cleanly of its flesh, blood spilling from a thousand ripped veins. The body was tall, athletic in build—as ruined muscle and sinew still managed to indicate—and somehow yet clad despite its flaying.

It was the body of Malic, high priest of the Order of Mefis.

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Malic's monstrous hand clutched his chest just below the throat. The demonic limb twitched twice, as if not quite dead despite its host's sorry condition.

Behind the macabre sight, a trembling Lylia stared at Uldyssian.

"My love!" she called, running to him and wrapping her arms tight around his body. She smelled of lavender and other flowers, a thing in utter contrast to the horrendous scene. Uldyssian inhaled deeply, wishing that all else had been nothing but a terrible nightmare.

Unfortunately, it was all too true. Pulling away from the blond woman, he eyed the late cleric. "Lylia...what happened here?"

"It was...it was part luck, and part the gift you awoke. I found you gone from the bed and came this direction. I thought I heard something and knocked." She shivered. "I heard the voice of dear Ethon and when I entered, the merchant stood waiting for me—" The noblewoman planted her face in his chest. "Oh, Uldyssian, please do not make me go on!"

"Just take a deep breath. We need to hear. There may be something important that you don't realize."

Mendeln slipped past the others and knelt by the morlu's body. Uldyssian found himself slightly annoyed with his brother's morbid interest, but chose to ignore it for the moment.

"I-I will try." Lylia pulled herself together. "The door I stepped through...it shut immediately behind me. I leaped away and saw that abomination—" She pointed at Malic's servant. "And then noticed that the window was completely shattered. Ethon laughed suddenly and his voice *changed*. I recognized the high priest's. Then...then...oh, Uldyssian, he was wearing poor Ethon's *skin*."

"I know, Lylia, I know. Cedric and one of the servants suffered the same fate."

"The boy, too? How horrible!"

He held her tight. "What then?"

Recovering, the noblewoman continued, "Malic...he started to reach for me with that...I have never seen such a hand!...and it came into my head somehow that it would do the same to me as had happened to Ethon! I found the strength to throw myself at him and *thrust* his arm back into his chest!"

Rising from the morlu, Mendeln went to the cleric's corpse. "And it caused this?" he asked. "So quickly? Against his will?"

"It was as if someone tore off a cloth cover in order to unveil a new statue beneath! I will *never* forget it! He did not even have time to scream, much less think..."

Uldyssian appreciated the justice in the situation. He hoped that Malic had suffered at least as much as any of his victims, especially young Cedric.

"And the morlu?" asked his brother, abandoning the flayed form. Mendeln's eyes were wide with curiosity. There was no longer even a hint of revulsion at what he had seen. "You managed *that*, too?"

Her expression hardened. "That beast came at me just as his master died! I do not know exactly what I did, but I waved my hand at him as if slicing with it...and you see what happened."

Uldyssian understood exactly what had happened. The stress of the situation had stirred up the powers within her just as it had him. Her instinct for survival had taken over and, fortunately, her action had dealt with the morlu in the only certain way.

"His chest is burned, too," remarked Mendeln. "Deeply, I might add."

"It must have happened at the same time. I do not remember. I do not *want* to remember."

A commotion arose outside. Uldyssian tightened his hold on Lylia. "That's enough now," he told his brother. "We were all fortunate to survive..."

Mendeln nodded, but then asked, "Did you fight any others, Uldyssian?"

"There are two outside. One buried deep in the ground, the other minus his head by the outer wall."

With a nod, the studious figure abruptly walked out of the chamber. Uldyssian blinked, not certain why that information should be so relevant to Mendeln.

A guard suddenly appeared at the doorway. He looked aghast at the sight. "Master Ethon! Where is he?"

"Master Ethon is dead, as is his son," explained Uldyssian. "The bodies are hidden away somewhere. They'll look like—they'll look like this one," he added, pointing at Malic.

"By my soul! Master Uldyssian...w-what happened here?"

There was no time to start repeating the entire story. "Evil, that's what happened. Let's clear things up and pray that we find the merchant and his son so that they can be given a proper burial. I fear Master Ethon might be found somewhere beyond the town..."

Another guard joined the first. The two exchanged quick words;

then the second man left. "I'll stand watch here," the first told the party. "Others will be told the dire news." His expression revealed his anguish. "Master Uldyssian...is there nothing you can do for them?"

It took Uldyssian a moment to understand just what the man meant. "No...no, nothing." He swallowed, disturbed even by the notion. "I'm sorry."

The guard nodded morosely, then took up a position in the corridor.

Achilios put a hand on Uldyssian's shoulder. "It might be good if we left here."

"It might be good if we left Partha completely," Uldyssian returned, scowling. His fears had come to pass. Friends and innocents had lost their lives horribly because of his presence. "As soon as possible, in fact..."

It did not take long to find the remains of Ethon's son. Cedric lay in his bed, the notion accepted by most—and pressed by Uldyssian—that the boy had died in his sleep. No one wanted to think otherwise.

The corpses of the morlu and the high priest were unceremoniously burned. No one considered contacting the Triune, although the unspoken thought was that sooner or later someone would come seeking the fate of the missing cleric. However, that was a situation that all were willing to put aside for the time being...or forever, if possible.

As was the custom of the Parthans, Cedric's corpse was burned with honor, the ashes placed in the family mausoleum the day after the travesty. No one spoke at the ceremony, but nearly all of Partha came to mourn.

It was not until two days later that they found Master Ethon himself. The morlu had hidden him well and if not for Achilios noticing a massing of carrion eaters, there might not have been anything left to burn. Ethon's ashes were set next to his son's and his wife's, and for days afterward, mourners wore across their chest a dark blue sash, the Kehjani symbol for honoring a great man.

Uldyssian wanted to leave, wanted to make certain that no more happened because of him, but there was always something requiring his attention. First it was dealing with Cedric, then speaking with all those who came to be comforted. No sooner had he finished that than Ethon was found and the cycle started over. Everyone turned to Uldyssian for guidance—Uldyssian, who still considered himself just a simple farmer.

Curiously, there emerged another source helping the Parthans cope

with the loss of their beloved leader. Mendeln. When a handful of people came to the house to see Uldyssian—who had departed to speak with others—Mendeln suddenly brought it upon himself to talk with them. His message was an unusual one that, when his brother first heard of it, caused much concern. Yet, to those who had listened, it brought some closure.

Mendeln spoke of death, but not as a finality. He declared it only a state. Master Ethon and his son lay not just cold in their graves; they existed now on another plane. They had gone beyond the struggles of mortal existence to face new and exciting challenges. Death was not to be feared, Uldyssian's sibling insisted, but to be better understood.

No one seemed more surprised at these suggestions than Mendeln himself. When questioned, he could not explain just when they had occurred to him. They just had.

The inhabitants of Partha knew nothing of Uldyssian's intention to leave them. That was the way he wanted it. If they discovered the truth, he feared that there would be an upheaval and many would simply give up their lives and follow him. Lylia seemed to think this a good thing, but enough trouble had been caused here. Uldyssian wanted to reach the great city without further loss of life. In the city, he told himself, things would be different. No one could attack him surrounded by so many people.

It was a lie, of course, but he preferred to believe it.

To his surprise, however, Uldyssian discovered that his party would be much smaller than he imagined. The news came from Achilios and dealt with an unexpected situation.

It was only two nights before their intended flight. Lylia still urged him to forget sneaking away. If the people wished to follow him, the noblewoman had said, was that not what he wanted? Did he not want to give Kehjan proof of what he offered? What better than scores of willing witnesses, including some who could show their own abilities, however meager at this point?

Rather than argue with the woman he loved, Uldyssian had walked the dark streets again. He always made certain to stay within sight of more populated areas, not desiring any repeat of the attack. It was doubtful that there were any more of Malic's creatures about, but one could never tell.

Still, despite his precautions, he had sensed someone quietly following him. Only when Uldyssian had turned a corner, then waited, did he discover it to be the archer.

"Ho, there!" Achilios blurted much too loudly. "I'm no morlu, I swear!"

"You knew I'd hear you and wait," Uldyssian returned. "Otherwise,

I'd have never noticed a sound."

His friend grinned. "True! I'm that good."

"What do you want?"

Achilios immediately sobered. "I wanted to talk with you, but in private. This seems the only way. I apologize if it's wrong."

"You can talk to me about anything, Achilios. You know that."

"Even...Serenthia?"

Like Uldyssian, the hunter had always called Cyrus's daughter by the shortened version of her name. That he now called her differently made the farmer's brow arch. "*Serenthia?*"

The other man cleared his throat. Never had Uldyssian seen Achilios look so uncomfortable. "She prefers that."

"What do you want?"

"Uldyssian...all that there is between you and Lyliia...it remains strong?"

The course of the conversation began to make sense. "As strong as the spring storms. As strong as a raging river."

"There is nothing between you and Serenthia."

"She is a beloved sister to me," Uldyssian stated.

Achilios managed a slight grin. "But far more to me. You know that."

"I've always known that."

This caused the archer to chuckle. "Yes, I've been pretty obvious, except maybe to her."

"She knew." Of that, Uldyssian could swear. Serenthia had been no fool when it came to the lovesick Achilios. "Now tell me what this is about. We've only got all night."

"Uldyssian...Serenthia wants to stay behind when you leave. I want to stay, too."

That she wanted to stay startled him, but that Achilios wanted to remain with her was not so surprising. Uldyssian found that he was relieved by the news, even though there was a part of him that ached at the loss of friends. "I wanted all of you to stay behind. That Serry—Serenthia—wants to do so now, I've no problem with. I'm also glad that you'll be there for her, Achilios, but...does she know and, if she does, do you expect anything to change between you?"

That produced a wider smile. "I've recently had some hint that it has."

This was even better—no, joyous—news. "Then I'm doubly happy. I've wished that she could see you as you are, Achilios...and that the two of you will be safe makes me glad, also."

"There is that last. I *shouldn't* abandon you, of all people. This is not

the end of the danger. There will be other Malics! I should be standing with you—”

Uldyssian halted him. “You’ve done more than you should, just as Serenthia and Mendeln have! I told you before, I wanted all of you far away from me. You spoke the truth; there’ll be other Malics, especially as long as the Primus still commands the Triune. I want none of you near me when the next comes...not even Lylia.”

“But she’ll never leave you!”

“I know...but I’ve got to try to make her see sense. If I do, please watch over her for me...and Mendeln, too.”

The hunter extended a hand, which Uldyssian clasped tight. “You know you can ask anything of me,” Achilios muttered. “Even to stay.”

“You could do me no better favor than to leave and keep the others with you.”

“What about the Parthans? What do I tell them when they discover you missing? They won’t like it.”

Uldyssian had considered this for quite some time, but all he could say now was “Tell them to keep growing.”

It was the words of a farmer and so the truest he could speak. He hoped that they would understand. He also hoped that they would forgive him for forever altering their lives. There would be no peace for them now.

No peace at all...

Mendeln remained outwardly calm, but inside he was very much on edge. He had come to realize many truths in the past few days, but those had also opened up the road to a thousand more unanswerable questions. He still had no idea what was becoming of him, save that it seemed sharply different from that affecting his brother or any of the rest. Their paths seemed pointed toward an expansion of life, a growth.

His appeared fixed upon death.

He did not entirely mind that. Not anymore. In truth, Mendeln found himself more comfortable than at the beginning, so comfortable, in fact, that he could spend much time away from other people. The solitude and the shadows seemed to beckon him. There was someone watching over Uldyssian’s younger brother. He knew that now. Who it was had yet to be revealed. That stirred Mendeln’s curiosity in more ways than one. True, he wanted to know the other’s identity. However, Mendeln also found it interesting that he did not fear the answer.

And by all rights, he *should* have.

With his gradual understanding of things came changes. Mendeln had always dressed a bit more subdued than Uldyssian, but now he found he favored the colors of the calming night. He also noted how people treated him with more veneration, but also a little uncertainty. Everyone appeared to see the transformation slowly taking place, but the rest understood it even less than he did and likely assumed it had to do with his brother's gift. Thinking that, they came to him for comfort concerning their lost leader and he told them what he believed. To his relief, most took his words to heart, even if they did not completely understand what he truly meant.

The shadows more and more became his companions. He began spending excessive time awake at night. It was at that point that Mendeln first started hearing the whispers. After two nights of listening, he finally became bold enough to try to follow them.

And, sure enough, they led directly to the cemetery.

This time, Mendeln did not hesitate to enter, despite the fact that there was no moon this eve, and no stars. He was not in the least afraid, for what lay before him was not the mysterious, endless place of his vision, but merely the final repository for the locals' loved ones. As such, it was a location mostly of peace, of murmured thoughts and eternal dreams.

But there was something else, something far more ancient in the very center. The thing that stirred the whispers and enticed him forward.

Mendeln had noticed that his night vision had grown acute of late. In truth, he felt he saw almost as well now as he did during the day. Even Achilios could not have matched him.

He neared the area that felt the source. Here the whispers grew more pronounced. Most of them were from the graves nearby and they talked of their lives as if those lives continued to this very moment.

Must get the beans cooked, then the bread in the oven. The children need their shirts mended...

That mare'll breed a fine colt, yes, indeed, then I can sell it once it's old enough to Master Linius...

Poppy says not to go play by the river, but it sparkles and the fishes dance under it. I'll just go and look a little and I'll be real careful...

On and on they went. If Mendeln squinted, he even thought that he could see vague shapes above the graves, shapes resembling those whispering.

But while all this fascinated him, it was not the reason for his presence here at this time. That had to do with what lay at the heart of the cemetery. Yet when Uldyssian's brother first looked there, it was to see nothing but an overgrown old stone with faded markings.

He leaned close. Disappointment filled him. The markings were in an old but legible script, not the ancient symbols for which he had hoped. Mendeln almost left, then, but suddenly recalled something else about his current location.

It was the very same place where, in his vision, the huge winged statue had stood.

That brought him back to the gravestone. With tentative fingers, he touched it where the name had been inscribed—

A tremendous force tossed him back more than a yard.

Mendeln landed against another stone, the collision jarring him. His vision blurred...

A huge, half-seen shape suddenly stood above the stone. It was nothing remotely human but neither did it seem anything demonic in nature. Shadow and starlight—starlight coming from somewhere other than the sky—formed what was visible. What Mendeln thought a long muzzle like that of a reptile turned his way.

You must stay with him..., it intoned. *The brother reveals the secret of the sister and she will kill for it...*

Mendeln's vision finally cleared...and the shape vanished. All was as it had been before he had touched the stone.

Somehow, though, he knew that it was not the marker itself that had been summoned this...*whatever* it was...to him. No, the true source was buried *beneath* the grave there. The marker had merely acted as a conduit of sorts.

But what did it mean? Mendeln ran the words through his head. *You must stay with him...The brother reveals the secret of the sister and she will kill one for it...*

"The brother? The sister?" None of it made any sense to him save that the shadow creature had warned him that death would come of some conflict between them. Oddly, this "death" disturbed Mendeln as none other had of late. It would cause even more terrible things to go into motion, he felt.

You must stay with him...

He jerked to his feet. The key lay there. The warning could refer only to one person, for who else would Mendeln first think of other than his brother?

"Uldyssian!" He raced from the cemetery, urgency overwhelming his respect for his surroundings. Whatever the message spoke about would take place very, very soon.

If it had not already...

In the dark of night, the Cathedral was literally a gleaming beacon

that welcomed all to it. No matter what time, there was always someone to greet a late-traveling pilgrim or lost soul. The Prophet had decreed it so, saying that the salvation of the masses could not cease merely because the day was over.

The Prophet could often be seen in those late hours, for Inarius did not require sleep. However, although he would have denied it, the angel did grow restive and so, unable to go out among the mortal throngs in his full glory and take flight, he instead paced the length and breadth of the spiraled edifice, sometimes appearing where his followers least expected it.

This night, the radiant youth stood at the top of the highest of the towers. From here, one could overlook the landscape for mile upon mile. It was as close as he could come to soaring through the sky.

Inarius was not afraid, but he was cautious. The game he played against Lucion required tact from both in order not to upset matters and reveal Sanctuary to his brethren. He felt more than adequate to handle the demon, even with Lucion able to summon all the might of the Burning Hells. After all, this world was *Inarius's* creation. No one could take it away from him...not the demon, not her, and not even some simple farmer whose life span was less than the blink of an eye compared with his.

And they would all soon find that out.

EIGHTEEN

Uldyssian heard the shouting just as he was building up the nerve to tell Lylia that she had to stay behind no matter what she desired. He had already failed twice this evening and the fact that both attempts had ended up in lovemaking had not assuaged his guilt much. Now, just as his breath and strength had finally returned and he had been determined not to fail a third time, what sounded like his brother's voice echoed throughout Master Ethon's house.

The people of Partha seemed to consider it Uldyssian's now, but he planned to use it only for a day or two more...and even that with much guilt. Once he was gone, Lylia and the others were welcome to make it their own long enough to sort out their lives.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Mendeln needed sorting out immediately. Uldyssian rose from the bed to see what was the matter.

"Do not be long," Lylia murmured, her tone seeking to entice him anew.

With a nod, he put some clothing on and stepped out...at which point he nearly collided with his brother.

"Uldyssian! Praise be! I feared the worst!"

Mendeln's tension was contagious. "What? Is it Peace Warders or morlu? The Cathedral's Inquisitors?"

"No! No!" Mendeln looked him up and down. "Uldyssian! You are well?"

"I am." The older brother did not bother to mention his intentions just now. Mendeln could learn about them later. "Now, what's this all about?"

"I feared...I thought..."

"What?"

With a look of chagrin, Mendeln shook his head. "Nothing. It was a nightmare, Uldyssian. Just a foolish nightmare..." His eyes glanced past his sibling, to where Uldyssian realized an unclothed Lylia could be partially seen in the bed. "I *am* sorry. Forgive me...I do not know what to think."

Mulling it over, Uldyssian suggested, "You've been up all hours, Mendeln, day and night. That's not good. You've helped me a lot in soothing the spirits of the Parthans after Master Ethon's slaughter. I think you just need some rest."

Uncertainty tinged his brother's voice. "Perhaps..." Again, the eyes flickered past Uldyssian. "I am very sorry to have intruded..."

Before Uldyssian could say anything, Mendeln whirled and rushed off to his room.

Shutting the door behind him, Uldyssian returned to Lylia. She smiled languidly as he slipped in next to her.

"Your brother is all right?"

"He's overexhausted."

The blond woman ran soft fingers over his chest, toying with the hair. "And are you?"

"Not in the least," Uldyssian returned, taking her in his arms. "Let me show you."

Three hours passed. Three hours in which he had drunken deep of Lylia again. Three hours since they had lain side by side.

Three hours that now saw Uldyssian just finishing the saddling of his horse.

It was the only way to resolve the situation. No more thinking. No more explanations. After assuring himself that the noblewoman was asleep, he had cautiously risen and dressed. With soft footfalls that would have made Achilios proud, Uldyssian had then slipped out of the room and through the house. When he had come across the few guards on duty—they swearing to watch over him as they had their former employer—none saw him sneak past. They could not be faulted for that, however, for it seemed that Uldyssian's gift worked for him without trouble this time. He wished the men to look the other way...and they had.

It was with growing guilt that Uldyssian rode quietly through the streets and, at last, out of Partha. The people were just beginning to understand what was happening to them. As recent as he was to his own abilities, the son of Diomedes knew that he understood them far more than anyone else did. Uldyssian was also the one responsible for their transformations. All *that* demanded he return to the town immediately and take responsibility.

But always weighing more heavily were the deaths. It was possible that he was making a terrible decision in abandoning everyone and riding to Kehjan himself, yet...

Uldyssian shook his head as he rode on. He could ill afford to think of any more "yets."

The trees surrounded him like silent sentinels. The night seemed blacker than usual. Uldyssian tried to encourage his mount to a swifter pace, but the animal moved tentatively, almost as if it feared

something lurking in the shadows.

The trail wound around a series of low hills. There was a well-traveled road leading from Partha to Kehjan, but Uldyssian wanted to make it less simple for anyone to follow him. Other than Achilios, who would understand his sudden departure, there were probably few who could track him. Taking a lesser trail would also guarantee less possible encounters with other travelers.

His belongings were meager, consisting mainly of the clothes on his back, a worn but workable sword, and a few bits of food he had managed to gather on his way out. His impulsive departure had given him little time to do much else. He had one sack of water—filled near the stables—but assumed that somewhere soon he would pass another source.

Thinking of the water sack, Uldyssian suddenly felt very thirsty. He tugged the pouch free from the saddle and drank his fill. The contents were a bit brackish, but tolerable.

As he swallowed the last, Uldyssian, eyeing the dark path ahead, considered his trek. The lowlands and Kehjan awaited to the east. The beginning of the jungle regions was not that far off; if he continued riding in his present direction, he would soon descend into the warmer climes. Cyrus had spoken in the past of the abrupt change that took place down there, almost as if some great mischievous spirit had divided up the world at whim, not planning. One day, Serenthia's father had told him, you would be wearing a nice, sensible coat that kept you safe from the snow...and the next you would find yourself gasping in the sweltering heat, slapping bird-sized mosquitoes every step.

Uldyssian had never entirely believed the man's tales, although some of the traders who had come to Seram *had* proven the exotic did exist in the east. There had been a handful over the years with the swarthy skin and long, narrow eyes which were supposedly predominant the farther into the jungles one went. Rumor had it that there were men darker yet, with flesh like coal. Others were supposed to be golden in color.

The mage clans were said to be filled with such strange races of men, and Kehjan itself was supposedly a melting pot. Lylia was proof of that, Master Ethon having even guessed just where her family would have been from. The very thought of approaching the vast city by himself suddenly proved very daunting to the simple farmer. He wished that he could have at least been accompanied by the noblewoman—who knew Kehjan best—yet she was also the one he least wanted near him should trouble arise. The fear that something terrible might befall her had been the most driving reason for his abrupt flight.

Her face filled his mind. Perhaps one day they would be able to reunite, but not after Uldyssian made certain that it was safe to do so. Yet, Lylia would always be with him, even if only in his memories and his heart—

“Uldyssian...” came a soft voice suddenly. “My love...”

He dropped the water sack, then twisted in the saddle. Behind him, to his disbelieving eyes, was the noblewoman herself. She was completely dressed and riding a large, dark steed that he did not recall.

“Lylia! What’re you doing here?”

Her smile alone began melting his resolve. “I’ve come to be with you, naturally.”

“You should’ve stayed in Partha,” he insisted, trying to gather his strength. “I left you with the others for your own sake...”

She urged the huge mount forward. “You may leave the others, but you can never leave me, Uldyssian. I began this with you and I will end this with you.”

He was touched by her dedication and wanted to take her in his arms, but recalled the evils of Malic. If she stayed at his side, Lylia would forever be a target of men such as the high priest...or, worse, their masters. No matter how much he yearned for her, Uldyssian had to let her go.

“No, Lylia. It has to end here for us. I don’t want you hurt. I don’t want you dead.”

“But you saw what I managed against Malic and think how powerful *he* was! I can defend myself, my love, especially from those who would separate us!”

It was a powerful argument, Uldyssian himself having been hard-pressed against the servant of the Primus. Still, he understood from his own abilities that Lylia might very well have been merely lucky, that next time she could discover herself entirely defenseless against some murderous foe.

The thought of what would happen then was all he needed to regain his determination completely. “No, Lylia. I can’t afford to think like that. If anything would happen to you, it would be too much! You’ve got to go back. No argument. Stay with the others, but don’t consider coming after me again.”

Instead of obeying, the blond woman dismounted. “I will not go. I will follow you wherever you ride.”

“Lylia—”

She left her horse behind, not at all concerned, it seemed, that it could wander off. Stretching her arms to Uldyssian, Lylia continued, “Come hold me once more. Kiss me once more. Prove to me that you

can leave me behind. Perhaps, if you say you can, I might reconsider.”

Although he knew that it was foolish to do so, Uldyssian also dismounted. Just one hug and kiss. It would give him something to remember. He would still insist that she return to the town. He would not weaken in any way.

But as she melted into his arms, as her lips found his, Uldyssian’s will drained away again. What if Lylia *did* ride after him? Would she not be more likely in harm’s way searching for him rather than being at his side? Surely, with how he was learning to control his gifts, he could keep her safe...

A shiver suddenly coursed through him as the kiss continued. Eyes closing, Uldyssian pulled back. A momentary weakness overcame him and it was all he could do to stand.

“Uldyssian! Are you ill?”

Almost as quickly as it had vanished, his strength returned. He shook his head. Opening his eyes revealed his vision to be blurred. Uldyssian blinked several times, trying to restore it.

“I think...I think it’s passing,” he muttered. A vague shape that had to be Lylia began to coalesce in front of him. Uldyssian frowned as she took on more definition. Something was wrong. She seemed different, almost as if—

He managed to stifle a shout, but could not keep from stumbling farther away from her. Without meaning to, the son of Diomedes collided with his mount.

The animal turned. Uldyssian heard it snort, then the horse began to shy away, as if it, too, saw something unsettling.

“What is it?” Lylia asked anxiously. “Uldyssian! What is it?”

He could not tell her, for he was not certain himself.

What stood before him was no longer the blond noblewoman. Rather, it was taller and hideously scaled, with a mass of fiery quills for hair, quills that ran down the spine to...to a reptilian tail ending in savage barbs. Where the delicate hands had been were now clawed fingers—four, not five. Worse, the feet were like hooves, yet splayed, too.

The body was unclad and, although monstrous, still very, very female. The lush curves enticed, drawing his eyes despite his dismay. But most horrific of all was that, when he looked up into the face—the face with its burning orbs that had no pupils and teeth designed for shredding—he could still see the features that he recognized as that of the woman he loved.

“Are you ill?” the creature asked in her voice, a black, forked tongue darting in and out with each word.

It was and was not the image from his nightmare and, for a

moment, Uldyssian prayed that he had been asleep the entire time. Yet, sense told him that this was reality...and that what he saw of Lylia was no illusion.

“What—what *are* you?”

“I am your Lylia!” she declared, sounding confused and slightly irritated. “What else could I be?” Her tail slapped the earth angrily.

His eyes shifted to it, then quickly back to her face. However, she noted his reaction and her expression grew more terrible.

A word escaped Lylia before she could stop her self. “*Lucion...*”

“Lucion? What does he have to do with this?” asked Uldyssian, trying desperately to make sense of things.

“It is obviously a spell of the Primus! He has transformed me into this!” Lylia reached for him, imploring, “Only your love can save me!”

He started toward her...and then some instinct bade him hold back. Uldyssian recalled how she had glanced back at the tail with little surprise, as if its being there was a perfectly natural thing.

A great pit opened up in his stomach. He shook his head, trying vehemently to reject what he was beginning to believe. This could not be happening! There had to be an explanation. Lylia could not be... *this*.

“Uldyssian!” the demonic figure beseeched. “Please! Hold me! I am frightened by your coldness! My love, only you can restore me!”

“Lylia...” Again, he stepped toward...and again his instinct was to retreat a moment later. Uldyssian stared closely at her, noting minute details that seemed to show a comfort, a familiarity, with her current form.

Next to him, his mount continued to grow more and more anxious. The horse began struggling with him. Uldyssian could barely hold on to the reins.

In contrast, though, Lylia’s steed stood still. *Too* still for one so very familiar with animals. It was almost as if the black horse was mesmerized...

His frantic mind raced for answers. Maybe this was not Lylia at all! Maybe she was still in bed and this demon had assumed her role. Yes, that could very well be it, he supposed.

Drawing his sword, he growled, “Keep away from me, demon! I’ve slain others of your kind! You’ll not fool me with that voice!”

The figure looked perplexed. “Uldyssian, it *is* Lylia! Remember our first meeting? How you found me admiring the horses? Remember how I insisted on coming to you when you were unjustly locked away? Have you forgotten everything?”

She went on to name a half-dozen more incidents with enough detail to drain away his hope that this was not her. In doing so, she

might have thought that she would pull him back to her, but all Lylia actually succeeded in doing was reinforcing the fact that Uldyssian had been cavorting with something monstrous.

Yet, despite that growing horror, the farmer could not keep his eyes off of Lylia. There was an unnatural seductiveness to her, so much so that his body desired to crush itself against hers despite what his mind knew. Her every movement enticed, as if, as she pleaded innocence, she also sought to use her wiles to ensnare him.

Shuddering, Uldyssian forced himself to look away. As he did, he heard a sharp, furious hiss.

“Look at me, Uldyssian!” Lylia abruptly cooed. “Look at what you have had and what you can have again...and again...and again...”

Something told him that if he looked, it would be his undoing. His will was only mortal, whereas that with which he had lain could never be called such.

“Get away from me, whatever you are!” he demanded, still looking slightly to the side. “Leave or...or I’ll do with you as I did the other demons!”

He expected anger or perhaps fear, as she would surely recall how he had disposed of the foul creatures sent forth by Malic—

Malic...suddenly *that*, too, made more sense. Uldyssian had been stunned by the swift ending to the cunning cleric, but that Lylia was more than she seemed explained much. Poor Malic had not known exactly what it was he had faced. Perhaps he had suspected, but even that would not have been enough. The irony might have made Uldyssian smile if not for his own circumstances.

A strange sound came from Lylia’s direction. Not a hiss, not a snarl...but *laughter* that tore at his soul.

“Poor little Uldyssian! My sweet darling! So naive, so believing! You were ever too trusting when it came to what I said...”

That almost made him face her, which was perhaps as she wanted it. “What do you mean?”

“Have you not wondered at how quickly your vaunted abilities have blossomed? Have you not wondered why all others—save your loving Lylia—have so far shown so little progress?”

He had, and the implications in her tone set the hair on his neck stiffening.

“Yes, he sees the truth *now*, or at least a hint of it. Yes, dear, sweet Uldyssian...I have guided you every step of the way! What you do, you do in great part because of *me*, not yourself! *I* it was who brought forth the storm, who guided the lightning, who caused most of your desire to become reality—”

And more than that, he knew suddenly. “And who slaughtered one

missionary, then slew another with a knife of mine!”

This caused her to giggle, a sound once musical to the human but now filling him with loathing. “The stage had to be set for you, my love! And what were they, *anyway*, but pawns of a treacherous lover and a fool of a *brother*?”

Uldyssian tried to digest the last. If she was to be believed, both the Primus and the Prophet were known to her very well. One was of her blood—assuming that such flowed through her—while the other had assumed the same role as Uldyssian, but before him. The knowledge only made Uldyssian’s consternation grow. His entire existence was nothing but delusion. He was not this powerful force, but rather a puppet. Her puppet.

But...a small part of him rebelled at that thought, reminding Uldyssian that this encounter was surely not as she planned matters. She had spat the name of Lucion out before she could help herself. Yet, if Uldyssian was only a weak pawn, why take this action? Why had Lucion just not destroyed him? Uldyssian could only assume that he was either of some value to the Primus or that Lucion could not do away with him. At the moment, Uldyssian doubted the latter, but the former still made some sense, based more than once on Malic’s words.

And if it did, it had to be because there was *something* to the power growing within the farmer. Why else would Lylia—if that was what this demoness was called—have chosen him in the first place?

“I told you before,” he finally said, trying to sound confident and defiant. “Leave now or else!”

Again, she giggled. “Ah, my darling Uldyssian, how I have come to adore your little stubborn streak! I would say it was from my side, but it could also be from his, they so arrogant, so righteous!” When he said nothing, Lylia continued, “You do not even know about that, do you? You do not even know your history! All of this I would have revealed to you in time, when you were ready! Shall I tell you now? We can still be together! You can still hold me, caress me...”

Feeling his will crumbling, Uldyssian ducked back. Unfortunately, the horse, still fighting with him, used that moment to pull the reins free. Uldyssian spun around, chasing after them, but the horse was already too far away. He watched the animal race off into the night.

“Poor Uldyssian...but you do not need that weak creature! I can teach you to fly or materialize *anywhere*! Once more, the nephalem will rise and, this time, they will assume their rightful place! Ha! I will assume my rightful place, no matter how the High Heavens and the Burning Hells cry out against it!”

There was a manic tone in her voice, a hint of madness that he had never heard. Without thinking, Uldyssian looked at her.

Her eyes immediately snared his. Her lips parted and her tongue flashed out, licking as if about to devour a tasty tidbit.

“When he cast me out for what he thought eternity, he underestimated my resolve! I had slain all of them for the sake of the children; why would I then let the children be his to mold forever in his imperious image? They were special. They were more than either demons or angels! I saw then that they were to be the future, the true end to the infernal struggle!”

Lydia raised one clawed hand and Uldyssian felt his right foot slide forward. She beckoned with a single finger and his left followed suit. With effort, he slowed his momentum, but it was only a matter of time before he would stand directly in front of her.

Obviously aware of this, she continued to talk as if all was well between them, as if he was happy to know that he had lain with a monster. “What you have called a gift, my love, is that and much more! You...*all* humans...are the spawn of our coupling! From demon and angel came the nephalem, greater than anything ever created in the cosmos! The force I stirred within you, the force which I found begging to be released, is nothing less than your *birthright*! He would see it smothered and all of you kept as so much docile cattle to serve his vanity...but I...but I can offer far more!” She reached toward him. “Much, much more...”

Gritting his teeth, Uldyssian growled, “The only thing you can offer me is a way to forget what happened!”

“Do you *truly* wish to forget everything, my darling? Do you truly wish to forget *me*?”

He finally managed to stop dead in his tracks. Face contorting from effort, Uldyssian retorted, “Nothing would please me more...”

“Is that so?” Lydia’s eyes flared darkly. “Is that so, my love?”

To his horror, Uldyssian discovered himself stumbling toward her at almost breakneck speed. His best efforts proved laughable and it suddenly came to Uldyssian that all this time Lydia had been toying with him. Not for a moment had he truly been able to stand against her power. His “birthright,” as she had called it, was nothing more than a hollow lie.

Her arms embraced him as he reached her. He, in turn, wrapped his own around her scaled form, the quills running down her back stabbing his flesh. Her body was a furnace, yet so very soft in the places that mattered. Uldyssian felt his lust rise up to do battle with his repugnance.

“Let us kiss and see how much you wish to forget,” Lydia mocked.

He could do no less than obey. His body reacted with a passion he could not quell.

No! Uldyssian shouted in his mind, even as he and Lylia pressed against one another. *No! I won't become hers again!*

A sharp pain in his lower lip made him wince. She had bitten him. Uldyssian felt her tongue taste the blood and the action caused him to shiver.

Lylia finally pulled back. Her expression said it all. She knew that while part of him was utterly disgusted, another was entirely under her domination.

The demoness chuckled. Uldyssian experienced a sense of foreboding—

A tremendous force *struck* him full, sending the human flying through the air as he had once thought he had done to Malic's Peace Warders. Uldyssian let out a cry as he soared among the trees, certain that he would hit one.

However, despite the odds so against him, he did not so much as graze a limb. Instead, Uldyssian finally dropped to the ground, tumbling hard and rolling several yards farther. Every bone felt as if it was breaking, every muscle shrieked. When the son of Diomedes finally came to a rest, he could not even so much as move a finger.

However, despite the distance Uldyssian had flown, he immediately sensed Lylia's presence close by. Sure enough, she loomed over him but a breath later.

"The great Uldyssian, changer of worlds! I think you understand now just how *great* you truly are..."

"D-Damn..." was all he could say, his lungs still pleading for air.

"Still defiant?" She knelt down, giving him, despite the darkness, a very close look at her charms. "A worthy trait, sometimes..."

He could do nothing when she kissed him again. Well aware of his conflicting emotions, Lylia stretched it out longer than the last.

"I think you will come around," the demoness cooed afterward. "But first, one more lesson to be learned, my love. The lesson of just what you are *without* me."

The wind suddenly raged, howling like a pack of wolves as it tore through the region. The quills atop Lylia's head shook as if alive. The demoness stood and raised her arms, clearly the cause of the shift in weather.

"Yes, let us see just what you are without me," she repeated with a laugh. "Let us see how long your defiance lasts! Not so very long, I think, eh, my love?"

Summoning what strength he could, Uldyssian made a desperate lunge at her ankles. What he hoped to do beyond toppling her, the human could not say, but he felt that he had to try.

His attempt was as pitiful as his earlier arrogance. His fingers

barely grazed her scaly hide. Lylia merely stood there, watching his antics.

“Not yet, not yet, dear Uldyssian! You can hold me again when you have been properly chastised...if, of course, you *survive* the lesson!” She cocked her head. “If...”

He snarled and tried again to reach her, but the wind trebled, shoving at him with such ferocity that Uldyssian was rolled back. The world spun around him for a moment and once more he was left gasping for air.

Without warning, the terrifying gust died. Silence fell over the area. Uldyssian’s lungs gradually filled. He managed to twist his gaze back, wondering what the temptress would do to him next.

But Lylia—if that was indeed her name—was *gone*.

Let us see what you are without me, she had said. He shuddered, knowing that her absence presaged dire events to come. The demoness had proven quite readily that Uldyssian had no true power, that everything had been a hoax perpetuated by her.

Visions of Inquisitors and Peace Warders filled his head. He imagined demons and morlu already waiting in the dark, their thirst for his blood only held in check by their masters. It mattered not which sect; both the Primus and the Prophet apparently wanted him for his vaunted “birthright.” However, once they discovered that he was merely an empty shell, a pawn, they would have no further use for him.

Worse, those he had led into this would also see him as a man of false promises. They would lose heart, turn against him. His friends would realize that they had given up everything for nothing.

Let us see what you are without me.

He knew what he was already...the greatest of fools and a *condemned* man.

NINETEEN

Someone was calling his name. He knew the voice, but could not answer it.

“Uldyssian!”

He tried to wave a hand, give some sort of call, but failed. His mind sluggishly attempted to recall what had happened. Slowly, Uldyssian recalled Lylia and the revelation of her nature. That horrifying memory proved enough to enable him to let out a primitive shout, a garbled sound that proved sufficient, for the searcher’s own calls became more pronounced.

“Uldyssian! I know you’re here somewhere! Where—”

It was Achilios’s voice, Uldyssian finally realized. Good, faithful Achilios. He tried to say the hunter’s name, but it only came out as a rasping sound.

“Here! Here he is!” said what sounded like Serenthia. As grateful as he was to know that she also searched for him, Uldyssian suddenly grew concerned. Lylia would take special pleasure in tormenting Cyrus’s daughter.

Soft hands took hold of his face. Uldyssian instinctively jerked away, thinking that Lylia had returned. However, that fear was quickly squashed as Serenthia said, “Praise be! You’re alive! Achilios! Mendeln! Here he is!”

The sounds of figures thrashing through the brush alerted him to the others’ nearby presence. He heard an oath which had to have come from the archer.

“Is he wounded?” asked Mendeln, sounding more curious than concerned.

“He has bruises,” Serenthia returned. “But I see no cuts, no slashes! I don’t feel any broken bones.”

Another figure leaned over the fallen farmer. “He looks as pale as death,” Achilios rumbled. “Or worse.”

More and more details came back to him. He remembered fearing for his friends and his brother. He also recalled starting to walk back, but then, as if Lylia had taken even his will to live from him, Uldyssian had, without warning, just blacked out. Had the others not come in search of him, he wondered whether he would have ever awakened again. He supposed he eventually would have. After all,

Lyliya had not seemed to want him dead, merely...broken.

“How—” He swallowed hard, then tried again. “How did you know —”

It was as if he had asked them to join together to commit some terrible crime. All three grew oddly perturbed. Their silence added to his unease.

Mendeln finally spoke. “We knew that your life was in danger.”

Uldyssian remembered his brother running through the house earlier, shouting his name. “You did?”

“We *all* did.”

The hunter and Serenthia nodded. “I thought it was a nightmare,” she added. “But it was so terrible, I had to go check. That was when I noticed Achilios also up.”

“And barely had she and I met, when Mendeln came, insisting that he needed to see you a second time.”

The younger son of Diomedes frowned. “The notion would not go away, Uldyssian. I knew that you might be angry with me, but I was determined to try to warn you again...only to have all three of us discover you...and Lyliya...gone.”

“Lyliya!” gasped the raven-tressed woman. “We’ve forgotten about her! Uldyssian! Isn’t she with you?”

“She was.” His answer came out as a croak...not because of his condition, but rather the repulsive memories.

And yet, a part of him *still* yearned for her.

His companions anxiously looked around. He quickly shook his head.

“No...don’t look...for her.” Uldyssian forced himself to a sitting position. “With our luck...you might find her.”

He sensed their confusion. With help from both Serenthia and Achilios, Uldyssian next stood. As he did, his gaze met that of his sibling. Curiously, the nightmarish vision of his brother struck Uldyssian once more. He stared with such intensity that Mendeln finally looked away, as if guilty of something.

“Uldyssian,” murmured Achilios. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t we want to find Lyliya? Why wouldn’t *you* want to find her?”

Had they not already been confronted with the reality of demons and spells, he could never have told them. As it was, Uldyssian’s shame was so great that it took him a long pause before he could finally begin.

And by the time he was through, they looked as horrified as he felt.

“You must’ve imagined it!” the hunter insisted. “It can’t be true!”

“A demon?” Serenthia blurted, with a shake of her head. “A demon?”

Only Mendeln, after his initial shock, nodded in understanding.

"It explains so much," he finally uttered. "If one looks back at all that has passed."

Uldyssian was not so certain that he shared his brother's opinion. He only knew that he certainly had been blind, deaf, and dumb. He had let Lylia command him around as if he were a dog. People had died because of her madness, because of her intent to create a world of magical beings.

It was to their credit that they took his story to heart. Uldyssian had left nothing out—not even the part where Lylia had claimed the world was called Sanctuary and had been created by rogue demons and angels. It was important to him that someone else understood that the demoness had some mad plan that had stirred up the Temple and the Cathedral, both of which somehow had ties to her.

That brought him back to her final declaration. She had left him on his own to teach him the penalty for defying her. That meant that they were *all* in immediate danger. "We have to leave Partha!" he blurted. "We have to flee for our lives! The jungles in the lowlands are our best bet—"

"Hold, Uldyssian!" Achilios demanded. "What do you mean? We can't flee! To flee means to become the hunted and there is no defense in that!"

"Achilios, all that I thought that I could do turns out to be a lie! It was all *her*! Everything!"

The archer shook his head. "I don't know if I believe that. It doesn't ring true!"

"And it isn't," insisted Serenthia. "Uldyssian, I've watched you. I've felt what you did. That could not have all been Lylia! What I sensed when you touched me was a part of *you*! I know that as well as I know...I know myself." Her face reddened as she said the last.

While he appreciated all that she said, Uldyssian refused to accept that his efforts had been anything but false spectacles directed in secret by Lylia. "You didn't see how easily she manipulated me, how easily she showed me that she could make me do whatever she wanted."

"Uldyssian—"

"No, Serry! Had she wanted to, Lylia could have just as easily slain me herself, there and then. You saw how I was when you arrived... and it takes all I can muster just to keep standing."

Achilios grunted. "There, he has a point. Let's get him to one of the horses."

As his friends assisted him, Uldyssian noted how he was practically a baby, so weak had his struggle with the temptress left him. Yes,

Lylia had not been jesting when she had said that he was nothing without her. It would merely take the others a little longer to understand that.

Unfortunately, they barely had any time left as it was. Sooner or later, someone would come for Uldyssian.

“Your points would have much more merit,” Mendeln commented as he held the reins of the animal while Achilios hefted Uldyssian into the saddle. “If they could but explain how it is that Serenthia and Achilios knew that you were in danger.”

The trader’s daughter quickly seized hold of that point. “Yes! That certainly doesn’t sound like a ploy to work in her foul favor!”

“You’ve all got to see the truth!” he growled, tearing the reins from his brother’s fingers. “It was all a trick! This was some game between demons and others in which I played the biggest fool of all!”

Bitterness overtaking him, he kicked the horse into motion and took off in the direction he had originally been heading. Achilios gave a shout, but Uldyssian paid him no heed. He had intended to flee rather than risk his friends and loved ones any longer and that was more important than ever.

But behind him, he quickly heard the sound of hoofbeats. Swearing, Uldyssian urged his horse to a full gallop. The path was treacherous and made more so because it was beginning to slope downward, but he did not care. Had the animal tripped and tossed him to his death, it would likely have been the best of ends. Not only would he no longer have to fear being twisted inside and out by manipulators, but Mendeln and the others would surely be safe. They had never been suspected of being threats or potential weapons by the Temple or the Cathedral. They would have nothing to fear.

“Damn you, Uldyssian!” Achilios shouted. “Hold up!”

The nearness of the hunter’s voice startled him. He glanced back to see Achilios barely a length behind. Much farther in the rear were the murky forms of Mendeln and Serenthia, who had to share one mount.

“Return to Partha!” Uldyssian shouted back to the archer. “Take them with you! I want no more deaths, save maybe my own!”

“Talk sense, Uldyssian! You know that none of us will leave you now, not after knowing what Lylia was and what she did!”

The other two were no longer in sight. Looking ahead again, Uldyssian saw a fork coming up. The path to the left almost immediately narrowed dangerously. Achilios would not be able to come alongside him.

Veering, Uldyssian entered. His horse nearly stumbled as the terrain grew more wild and uneven. Very few had obviously taken this route in years, but he did not care. All he wanted was for it to slow or stop

those behind him.

Achilios's voice rose as the hunter swore at something. Uldyssian did not look back, concentrating on his own course. The clatter of hooves behind him lessened. His friend was clearly falling behind.

Then, out of the night, a series of low, thick branches cut across the trail. Uldyssian barely had time to avoid striking the first one dead-on. As it was, his right arm received a terrible blow that reverberated through his entire body. It was only by sheer will that the collision did not stun him enough to make him unprepared for the next and thicker branch.

A third and fourth one came in rapid succession. Uldyssian ducked left, then right, then right again. The last of the branches scraped the top of his head. He felt a trickle of moisture, undoubtedly blood.

But despite his injuries, Uldyssian's hopes rose. Achilios would see the branches and be forced to slow. It was a chance for the son of Diomedes to either gain on his pursuer or lose him altogether, for there were places coming into the dim moonlight that promised Uldyssian such cover that even the skilled hunter would be unable to track him.

Then, a crashing sound nearly caused him to steer his horse directly into a tree. Without thinking, Uldyssian slowed the animal. The noise had come from back up the path, about where the treacherous branches would be.

The branches...and if he had not slowed, *Achilios*.

Uldyssian reined the horse to a halt and listened.

Silence...no...the snorting of a horse. Not a horse in motion, though.

He started to urge his mount forward, then hesitated again. Still no sound other than the animal.

With an oath, Uldyssian turned back. He had wanted to lose Achilios, nothing more. If something worse had happened...

The dark path proved just as haphazard to climb as it had to descend. Bits of earth and rock broke away under the hooves. At one juncture, the horse's shifting nearly caused Uldyssian to slip.

Ahead of him, a massive form loomed. Achilios's horse, but without the hunter. Where—

A groan arose from somewhere to the left, where the path dropped precariously. Uldyssian's fears increased. He pulled up and, barely waiting for his mount to halt, leapt to the ground. Every muscle burned; in his anger, he had paid little mind to his own state and now his body was angrily reminding him that he could barely walk.

Yet, despite that, Uldyssian continued. He took both his mount's reins and those of the other horse and tied them to one of the very

branches in question. Uldyssian then stumbled in the direction of the moan.

The irony of the situation did not escape him. Achilios had freely come to help Uldyssian and *this* was how his friend had been repaid. Guilt vied with shame now. He remembered even *hoping* that one of the branches would cause Achilios trouble, although not to *this* extent. Nevertheless, Uldyssian *had* been aware of the danger and yet he had not cared about anything but his own choices.

The descent was a slippery one, for the ground gave way with every step. There was still not a sound of the third horse and Uldyssian wondered just how far behind his brother and Serenthia were. He could not simply trust that if he dragged Achilios up to the path that they would come across him. Uldyssian had ceased believing in miracles, great or small.

Below him, he saw only darkness. It had been his hope that the hunter's blond hair would stand out, but that was not the case. Uldyssian grew more concerned. Was he even in the same area where his friend had ended up?

Then, some urge sent him toward the left, a place he would not have considered a possible location. Yet, when Uldyssian thought of turning back, he found himself unable to do so. Frowning, the farmer delved deeper.

A moment later, Uldyssian spotted a rounded form. He dove toward it, reaching out and cautiously turning it over.

As he did, a cough escaped the shape. "U-Uldyssian? Strange. I-I thought I was rescuing *you*?"

"I'm so sorry, Achilios! I never meant for this to happen! Can you stand?"

He heard the hunter grunt in pain. "Left leg's stiff, but I think it's just very sore. Give—give me a hand."

As Uldyssian did, his own body reminded him again of what it had suffered. The two men groaned simultaneously.

With a weak laugh, Achilios remarked, "W-We are a stalwart pair, eh?"

That brought a chuckle from Uldyssian. "I remember worse scrapes than this when we were children. We didn't groan at all, then."

"Children are more resilient than old men!"

They slowly wended their way back up. More than once, one or both of them slipped. As they finally neared the top, Uldyssian heard the slow clatter of hooves. Mendeln and Serenthia had finally caught up.

"I promised you that we would find them," his brother said with unnatural calm. "You see?"

But the woman did not waste time answering him, instead sliding down from the animal and racing, not toward Uldyssian, but rather *Achilios*.

"Are you all right?" she demanded, putting her arms around him.

"I'm fine...I am."

Serenthia did not seem convinced, but she finally turned to Uldyssian. "What happened?"

He opened his mouth to explain, but Achilios cut him off. "I was careless, Serenthia, that...that was all. Fortunately, my good friend realized something had happened and came back for me."

She ran her hands over the hunter's arms, chest, and face, not relaxing in the least until she was certain that his injuries were shallow. "Praise be. If something had happened..."

Uldyssian saw that Achilios had spoken the truth when he had said that Cyrus's daughter had finally turned to him. It was one of the few things to make him happy this night. The two were a good match.

He felt his legs starting to give. Keeping his tone level, Uldyssian said, "Let's get to the horses."

It took effort for both men to move, which caused renewed concern for Achilios from Serenthia. "Your leg!" she gasped. "Is it broken?"

"No, just bruised, like my pride. I should know to watch out for low branches."

"Give me your arm," Serenthia insisted. She all but seized the hunter from Uldyssian and guided him toward his horse. Despite all that he had been through, the scene momentarily made Uldyssian smile.

Other hands suddenly came to his own aid. "Let me help you," Mendeln said, appearing next to him as if by magic. "Put your arm over my shoulder."

His brother's presence both comforted and shamed him further. Uldyssian muttered, "Thank you, Mendeln."

"We are all we have left."

His words struck the older son of Diomedes to the core. He had concerned himself so much with Lylia that he had not truly considered Mendeln in as much depth as he should have. But with that renewed concern came again thoughts of what would happen to Mendeln and the others if they remained with him.

"The Torajan jungle," Mendeln remarked quietly, without warning. "The deepest of them all, southwest of Kehjan."

"What about the Torajan jungle?"

Blinking, his brother glanced at him. "Torajan? What do you mean?"

"You mentioned the jungle. Specified the Torajan one, southwest of

the great city.”

“Did I?” Mendeln pursed his lips, but did not otherwise seem startled at his lapse of memory. “It does strike me as a place to go, if we are not returning to Partha.” He nodded toward his mount. “I have some provisions and water, enough for us to get started, at least. Admittedly, that and having two riders slowed us down during the chase.”

Uldyssian could not hide his confusion. “You gathered supplies? When?”

“They were already prepared. I assumed that it was an extra mount you had to abandon at the last moment.”

A glance at the horse ascertained for Uldyssian that it was not the dark beast ridden by Lylia. Yet what explanation was there for a fully laden animal found waiting just when his brother needed one?

Not certain whether this was a gift or bait of a sort, Uldyssian thought again of the jungles. There was merit in the suggestion, despite its questionable origin. Somehow, coming from Mendeln, he doubted that it had been planted by the demoness.

“The Torajan jungle,” he muttered a second time, now with more conviction.

“You want to go there.” It was not a question.

With a grim nod, Uldyssian replied, “I don’t think I have any choice.”

“We do not have any choice.”

Uldyssian tightened his grip on his brother’s shoulder, grateful for Mendeln’s determination. “We.”

“Do not mistake me, Uldyssian. I am referring to Achilios and Serenthia, too.”

“What *about* us?” called the hunter from the saddle. Even as he asked, he pulled the trader’s daughter up to him. No one questioned the change in riding partners.

“We plan to ride to the Torajan jungle,” Mendeln answered bluntly before Uldyssian could properly phrase the suggestion himself.

“Torajan.” Achilios cocked his head to the side. “The densest, most unknown, I’ve heard. Few folks there. Toraja is the only city, the people said to oil their skins black and file their teeth like daggers.” He let out a laugh. “Sounds like a delightful place to visit.”

Uldyssian thought of the journey ahead. They would first have to travel through other unexplored and possibly treacherous regions before reaching their destination. In truth, there was really only one, immense jungle, but, being territorial, men always divided up places and gave them different names. The Torajan jungle just happened to be a particular piece of the much vaster one. In fact, assuming they

made it that far, it was very likely that they would not realize it for days after.

He could not imagine Serenthia in such a place. “Serry—”

“If you say one word about me staying behind, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, I’ll teach you to regret it. There’s no question as to whether I’m going.”

Achilios grinned. “And you know that I won’t argue with her, either.”

Well aware of that, Uldyssian nodded. However, he needed them to understand the urgency of the situation. “If you come with me, there’s no returning to Partha. I won’t go back. There’s too much of a chance that it’ll be near impossible to leave again without arousing the entire town.”

This brought an immediate acknowledgment from Mendeln. Seeing that, Achilios and Serenthia quickly acquiesced.

“I have some supplies and water,” Uldyssian’s brother informed them.

“I’ll provide fresh meat along the way,” the hunter returned without a trace of conceit. All there knew that Achilios would be able to keep his promise with ease.

There really was only one thing left to say and Uldyssian had to say it now. “Thank you...I’d rather you all stayed back, but...thank you.”

As Mendeln mounted, he said, “They will discover us gone come the dawn. We should be as far away as possible, by then.”

No one could argue with that logic. When the Parthans realized what had happened, some of them would surely go out hunting for Uldyssian, at least at first. He hated abandoning them, but it was for their own good. They would soon find out that their gifts were, in truth, nothing. They would feel tricked and anger would replace adoration.

As he led the party off, Uldyssian thought of how violent that anger might become. Had he left the others in Partha, they might have become the focus of the townsfolk’s ire. Certainly, they would have been run out of it. In a sense, Mendeln, Achilios, and Serenthia were better off with Uldyssian.

At least, for the moment.

Lucion stared into the bowl of blood, his gaze intense. He had seen everything occurring since first casting the spell in coordination with the other two demons. He had found *her*—Lilith—in the arms of the mortal knave and had planned well his sister’s unveiling before the fool. What a delicious piece of work that had been. All her arrogance

had been channeled into futile posturing and anger. She had turned on her own puppet, finally abandoning him.

And there, Lilith had made the greatest of mistakes.

The vision in the bowl finally began to fade, the result of the last of the life essence fading from the blood. Lucion could have redone the spell, but that would have required new bartering with Astrogha and Gulag, who would demand much more than the simple offering he had given them the first time. That was the trouble with both demons and humans; they always wanted more.

No, Lucion would handle this purely on his own, for the reward would be one too precious to share with anyone else. It would not be difficult to keep his two counterparts ignorant, for there was much that he had done since assuming his role as Primus of which they were unaware...of which even his *father* was unaware.

“Thank you for laying the groundwork, sister dear,” Lucion rasped. He was also grateful to the late Malic and Damos, servants who had fulfilled their duties, whether they knew it or not. It had been a shame to lose both of them, but Lucion already had a notion as to a competent replacement for the high priest and there were always more vicious morlu. What was important was that by touching Malic’s demon limb—which, knowing the cleric’s greed and his sister’s sense of irony, had been a foregone conclusion—Lilith had not only revealed herself, but had inadvertently removed, for a brief moment, any magical shields she had created.

It had been at that moment that a patient Lucion had cast the spell preparing the downfall of her plans. He had arranged so that when certain elements went into play, Uldyssian ul-Diomed would see her for what she actually was. It had all gone so perfectly. She had even played into it further, in her fury twisting the facts so that her puppet would not realize what was the truth and what was lies.

And leaving Uldyssian ready to be manipulated by him.

Lucion’s grin widened—then faded as the sensation that he was being watched overcame him. He immediately searched not with his eyes, but rather with his mind, pretending to stare at the fading scene in the bowl while in actuality scouring the chamber of the other presence.

Yet, despite his best efforts, he found no one but himself. Still wary, the son of Mephisto quickly searched the temple for the other two demons. He found Gulag down below, the destructive beast tearing apart morlu for the simple pleasure of it. Other morlu attacked the demon with gusto, inflicting wounds that immediately resealed. This lack of success did not in the least dull their hunger; they simply attacked anew as Gulag ripped another of them apart. The demon of destruction knew that so long as he did not eat any of the broken bits,

he could cause as much mayhem as he desired. The morlu would simply be resurrected with the end of the cycle, their slaughter only making them even more vicious warriors when next they fought.

Satisfied that it was not Gulag, Lucion sought then for Astrogha. The spider was a more cunning creature, being of Diablo's calling. If either of the two thought to spy upon him for their own goals, it would be that one.

But Astrogha remained in one of the shadowed corners he preferred, dining at this moment on what little remained of Brother Ikarion. Around the shrouded, multilimbed form, smaller arachnids scurried. They were of the essence of the demon, extensions of him that did his bidding while he waited.

Could it have been one of them? Lucion considered, but knew that even the Children, as Astrogha called the creatures, bore his taint. Lucion would have recognized him in them.

Still motionless, he surveyed the hidden chamber once more, but again found nothing. Demons, being what they were, were prone to unnatural distrust and Lucion knew that even he was not immune from that.

He finally pushed the incident from his mind. All that mattered was Lilith's puppet. She had set him on the path; Lucion would now complete his education.

Or, if the human proved to be nothing of value after all, *destroy* him.

In a place that was and was not real, a figure shrouded in black materialized. Around him there was nothing but absolute darkness, yet he showed no discomfort in being there. In fact, this was *home* for him, as much as anywhere had been in a thousand lifetimes.

He waited in silence, aware that the one with whom he needed to speak would come when it was right to do so. The shrouded figure understood that it might mean waiting for what seemed days, weeks, or even years, but that did not matter. In the other place, that which was called Sanctuary, no time would pass at all. He would return at the very moment that he had left.

Which still might be too late.

There was no sound, no wind. He felt solid ground beneath his booted feet, but knew that to be illusion. In this place, everything that existed was but the dreams of his teacher.

Then...from above there came illumination, a warm light that stirred his tired bones. He gazed up, his eyes immediately adjusting to the difference. Above him, what appeared to be an array of distant

stars formed. At first, they clustered together, but quickly began to spread far apart.

As they did, they formed a vague shape. Like a constellation, the stars create a half-seen, gargantuan image that, to his trained eye, resembled a beast as mythic as himself.

“It is her brother that moves,” the shrouded figure murmured. “*He* does not. That can only mean one thing...”

And in a voice that would have made even angels pause, the other replied, “*Yes...there will be death...*”

TWENTY

Toward the jungles they rode, stopping only when necessity forced them. Uldyssian guessed that they made good time, although since none of them had ever been far from Seram before this insanity, they could judge only by Mendeln's recollections. Fortunately, Uldyssian's brother proved again that any map shown to him for a short period remained burned in his memory, for landmarks he told them to watch for started to appear.

The latest was a squat peak on the horizon, what Mendeln said the map's owner had called a volcano. None of them knew of such a thing, and when it was explained that this was a place where once burning rock had been shot out of the ground like missiles, the rest had looked at Mendeln as if he were mad. He, in turn, only shrugged.

Uldyssian often looked back, certain that this would be the time when he found the people of Partha hot on their trail. However, of the townsfolk there was still no sign.

"The volcano is the last landmark," Mendeln went on. "It, in fact, lies within the first portion of the jungle."

That caused Uldyssian to straighten in the saddle. "So, we're nearing the Torajan region?"

"No, we have quite a ride still, but at least we have reached the lowlands."

Indeed, they had all already noticed the change in climate. It was warmer and muggier. Uldyssian was covered in sweat and even Achilios and Serenthia showed signs of the heat. Only Mendeln appeared untouched. In fact, he seemed to bask in the change.

The two brothers had not yet discussed what was happening to the younger of them, the harsh journey leaving the entire party exhausted each evening. However, as Mendeln had indicated, the jungles would immediately offer some respite...even if also some new danger. Uldyssian hoped that, once they entered, he might find time to deal with his sibling.

The clothes that they had been given in Partha had begun to fray with overuse. However, since they had purposely avoided contact with civilization, there had been no opportunity to find new garments or at least properly clean their own.

Food and water were not a problem, just as Uldyssian had hoped. Achilios had supplemented their original supplies with game and the

others had gathered berries. Most of the supplies from Partha were now gone, but in their place was bounty enough to keep them going for three days. In the meantime, they continued to gather more whenever and wherever possible.

The wooded lands with which they were so familiar had given way the past three days to brush. According to Mendeln, whom everyone assumed was correct, tomorrow would see the first hints of jungle vegetation.

With that in mind, they made camp just before sunset. Uldyssian felt very unprotected without even a few trees nearby, but the only other choices would have been either to retreat back half a day to a small grove or to ride night and day to reach the jungle. The others seemed just as ill at ease, which helped him not in the least. Aware that all he had believed himself to be had been false, Uldyssian knew that he could not help any of his companions should they now be attacked by Lylia or either sect.

Fortunately, the night passed peacefully, so much so that for once Uldyssian slept until dawn without once stirring. He rose refreshed, but also angry at Achilios, who had made certain not to disturb him even when it was Uldyssian's turn to take watch.

Ominous clouds covered the sky, but there was no rumbling nor did the wind pick up. Uldyssian eyed their surroundings with some trepidation, yet wondering if the clouds presaged something supernatural. However, their day's journey went so smoothly that, well before the sun fell, they not only reached the edge of the jungle, but, after several anxious minutes' consultation, the party plunged in.

The jungle both fascinated and repelled Uldyssian. He had never seen such bizarre plants or such lushness. The plant life seemed to be fighting with itself, each species seeking some sort of dominance.

"Everything's so green," marveled Serenthia.

Achilios slapped something crawling on his arm. "And so full of bugs. Never seen the likes of that thing."

"There is more life in one square mile of this realm than in twenty surrounding Seram," Mendeln declared.

No one asked how he knew, expecting that it was something he had learned from a passing merchant. Certainly Mendeln's comment struck Uldyssian as truth, especially as he swatted a variety of exotic and macabre insects from his own body. He began having great regrets for choosing the jungles in which to hide.

"Is there a river ahead anywhere?" asked the archer.

Mendeln gave it a thought. "Tomorrow. There should be one by day's end tomorrow."

"We should still have enough water."

The jungle canopy combined with the clouds to make them feel as if they traveled the entire day in twilight. The horses grew restive, not at all used to such terrain. Their tails constantly slapped back and forth as they did their best to also keep free of vermin.

Some of Lylia's story came back to haunt Uldyssian the farther he and his companions rode. She had said that the world had been created by a band of refugees gathered from both sides of a celestial conflict. Angels and demons together. Such a fantastic combination of power would definitely explain what he still considered an abrupt change in both climate and landscape.

It also reminded Uldyssian of just how tremendous the danger was to him and the rest.

When it finally grew too dark to risk any further movement, they simply stopped. Since the past few hours, they had been making their own trail, no easy task. Gathering their horses near them, they ate what food they had; then all but Achilios retired.

Uldyssian did not go to sleep for quite some time, the jungle continually unsettling in its differences from what he had grown up knowing. Strange creatures called out. Insects sang for mates. There seemed more noise now than during the day.

There came one moment when something of fairly good size passed within a short distance of their encampment. Achilios, still on guard duty, slipped into the jungle, but returned a few minutes later without a word. Still, Uldyssian thought that the archer acted a bit unsettled.

While the night was cooler than the day, it was still very humid. Uldyssian constantly felt damp. His hair clung to his head. The discomfort of the jungle fueled his misery and fears. Once more, he had chosen wrong. He should have kept to the regions he knew. At least the familiarity would have given him some respite.

By the time the light of another overcast day finally poked through the canopy, everyone was more than ready to move on. At the very least, the thought of reaching the river gave them hope. The river meant fresh water and a chance to see something over their heads other than thick leaves.

Again, they constantly swatted at insects. Everyone save Mendeln had welts, the denizens of the jungle for some reason not finding his pale flesh to their liking. Uldyssian's brother remained warmer-dressed than the rest, yet did not suffer as they.

Near midday, the party paused to eat and deal with other necessities. The four shared what water remained, Uldyssian insisting that he be the last.

However, as he raised the shriveled sack to his lips, his eyes strayed to the surrounding jungle...and something thick like a tree that was

definitely no tree.

He immediately lowered the sack for a better look...only to find no trace of the shape.

Serenthia noticed his reaction. "What is it?"

"I thought I saw...I don't know. I thought it was a tree, but..."

"But it wasn't?" asked Achilios, his expression unreadable. "Tall and thick of build, was it?"

It was enough to verify a suspicion of Uldyssian's. "You saw something last night. I thought as much."

The archer raised a hand in defense against his friend's words. "Hold on! I saw as much as you, which was little enough! Whatever it is, it's as much a part of the jungle as these trees and shrubbery!"

"Is it stalking us?" Serenthia asked, looking around.

Here Achilios looked contemplative. "At first, I would've said yes, but now...the more I think of it, the more it seems our friend is... *curious*."

"That kind of curiosity, I don't like," muttered Uldyssian. "Do you think there's more than one?"

"I noticed only it. There could be more, but it strikes me as solitary."

"Like a predator?"

The hunter grimaced.

Their mood more pensive, they quickly mounted and left the area behind. For the rest of the day, the riders kept one eye on the path and the other on the thick vegetation. No one saw so much as a trace, but the consensus was that their mysterious companion had not yet abandoned them.

When at last they heard the rushing of water, Uldyssian greeted the sound with a contradictory mixture of relief and suspicion. He was glad to reach this latest landmark, but at the same time the river was a barrier of sorts. With something now tracking them, Uldyssian began to fear that all they had accomplished was willingly riding into another trap.

Achilios clearly thought likewise, for as soon as he had dismounted, he said in a low voice, "I'm going to find a place to cross quickly, if need be."

On the louder pretense of hunting, he hurried off. Uldyssian eyed Cyrus's daughter, who, in turn, pensively watched Achilios vanish into the unsettling wilderness.

"He'll be fine," the son of Diomedes said somewhat awkwardly, aware that his friend would not be in this situation if not for him. "Isn't that right, Mendeln?"

"Yes, he should be." But Mendeln's tone was distracted, which did

not help the situation any. He seemed interested in something at the edge of the river, but what it was, Uldyssian could not say. Certainly not some huge creature such as he and the archer had noted. The only thing one generally found in rivers was fish.

As they filled their water sacks, Achilios made a swift return. Serenthia had to visibly hold back from running to him. The blond hunter smiled with more assurance as he reached the party.

“There’s a *bridge*,” he announced merrily. “Just a few minutes downstream. Looks worn and there are some planks missing, but the horses should cross over just fine.”

Uldyssian took heart. Without hesitation, he said, “We make camp on the other side, then.”

He received no objections. The four quickly remounted, this time Achilios taking the lead. They followed along the water’s edge as the hunter dictated and very soon sighted the bridge in question.

It had been made from elements of the jungle around it. The planks had clearly been harvested from the local trees, the undersides still covered in bark. The craftsmen had skillfully shaved the other side flat. Three of the planks were broken or completely gone, but if the party guided their horses on foot, there would be little threat.

Strong vines and other long plants had been used to tether the wood together. Some sort of brown substance had also been added in between to keep everything solid. Considering their surroundings, Uldyssian thought that the builders had done the best possible. True, the bridge swayed a little under their moving weight, but otherwise held.

Once they were over, there was debate as to what to do next. Achilios wanted to remain near the bridge, and Serenthia seconded this. Uldyssian preferred a little more distance from it.

Mendeln...Mendeln left the decision to the others. As usual, he seemed lost in thought.

The archer finally pointed out that while Uldyssian was rightly concerned about their unseen companion, it was possible that something of a more immediate threat lurked nearby on *this* side. Conceding this, Uldyssian agreed to their remaining near the bridge.

They kept their campsite as compact as possible, huddling close to the animals and one another. Only Achilios left the vicinity, necessity forcing him to hunt. When he returned, the relieved greeting he received was more for his safety than the bountiful catch he carried.

The two creatures that the archer had brought with him were recognizable as reptiles, but none such as any had ever seen. They were huge—nearly five feet from the tips of their muzzles to the ends of their tails. One look at the terrifying teeth was enough to let the

others know that these were generally predators, not prey.

Achilios quickly reassured them. "I was never careless. I assumed that there might be dangers by the river, but also game. I found this pair hiding among some reeds. I don't think that they were prepared for something like me."

Uldyssian studied them dubiously. "Are you sure that they're worth eating?"

"Some of the best meat I caught back home came from snakes and lizards! These, I suspect, will be like a feast in comparison!"

The two dead beasts had done what little else had...drawn Mendeln's attention. He touched one almost gently. "These are young. Juvenile."

"I thought as much myself," Achilios replied. "The big ones are probably three times the size." To Uldyssian, he added, "These were wet, as if they'd just been swimming. You wanted us to move farther away from the bridge and the river. I'd say that was an idea we should still act on."

They wasted no time in following the suggestion. Achilios, scouting ahead, located a place he believed far enough from the river reptiles' normal haunts. Even then, Uldyssian insisted that they ride a little longer, despite the darkness.

Achilios showed him another spot. Finally satisfied, they halted again. While Mendeln and Uldyssian gathered fuel for the fire, the hunter and Serenthia began the process of skinning and cooking the meat.

"Don't stray far from the camp," Uldyssian reminded his brother as they left, Mendeln's condition worrying him.

"I will take care. Do the same."

While there were plenty of trees, finding viable firewood was not so simple. The plant life had a constant moistness to it. Uldyssian picked what he could, cautious in his task lest some vermin or animal hiding in the bush took umbrage at his presence. Unfortunately, due to conditions, Uldyssian soon found himself disobeying his own orders to stay close; there just was not enough good fuel nearby.

In order to make up for the necessity of searching farther away, Uldyssian kept a careful eye on his position relative to the camp. This encouraged him to go yet farther afield, and gradually the pile in his arm grew to something useful.

Behind him, he heard the rustling of branches. Aware of how far out he had strayed, Uldyssian suspected that one of his friends had come in search of him. He turned around—

And dropped the firewood.

The behemoth stood half again as tall as him and more than twice

as wide. At first, Uldyssian thought it a demon, for it had a vague resemblance to a man, in that there were two arms, a pair of legs, and a head, but beyond that was a creature so bizarre that surely it had not been born of his world.

Yet, if a demon, it was a very docile one. In fact, although its face was much in the shadow of the night, Uldyssian could for some reason sense that there was an intelligence there, one that was driven by more than the thirst for mayhem and blood.

The giant shifted slightly, but not in any manner that caused Uldyssian alarm. In that flash of movement, more details became apparent. The entire torso had a rough finish to it that reminded him of nothing less than wood. Indeed, one limb ended not in a hand or paw, but a great, thorny club upon whose flat head was etched runes of some sort. The other arm had a hand, but there was also a broad, sharply bent formation that started near the elbow and looked to the human like a living shield.

Two bat-wing horns rose above the head, which was squat and heavily browed. Uldyssian could detect no mouth or nose and the eyes were but deep crevasses.

The behemoth strode toward him at an oddly leisurely pace, and as it moved, there was not the least sound. Uldyssian understood that the rustling he had heard earlier had been purposely meant. The creature had wanted him to be forewarned.

“Are you...are you the one who followed us?” Uldyssian finally asked.

The figure did not answer. Instead, with astonishingly graceful movements, it went down on one knee before the human.

At that moment, Achilios’s voice came from the direction of the camp. “Uldyssian! Where are you? Uldyssian—”

His gaze strayed toward the voice. A moment later, the archer appeared.

“Am I going to have to keep searching for you every time you stray away from a camp?” Achilios asked cheerfully.

Uldyssian’s eyes widened at such a mundane question in the presence of so astonishing a being as the jungle dweller. He looked to the creature for its reaction...and saw then why Achilios acted the way he did. The behemoth was gone, as if he had never been there.

The hunter noticed his tension and all humor vanished. “What is it?”

“It...*he*—” Yes, for some reason, Uldyssian knew his visitor had been male. “—was here.”

“What...the thing tracking us?” Achilios started to ready his bow, but Uldyssian quickly put a stop to the action.

“He means no harm. He...he knelt there.”

“Before you?”

Uldyssian wanted to deny that, but finally nodded. “He knelt before me.” The farmer went into quick detail, giving even a cursory description of the creature. “And then, when I looked in your direction, he simply vanished.”

“Which means that it was *you* specifically that he wanted to see, old friend. You.”

“He may have never seen a human like us, that’s all. It could’ve been Mendeln or you. Since Malic used her, Serenthia usually stays near the camp.”

His companion did not see it that way. “There were plenty of chances to view me, especially that first time. Mendeln, too. He wanted to see you, Uldyssian. You must face that.”

“There’s no reason.”

Achilios turned back toward the camp, but although he moved casually, the bow remained in his grip. “Only in your eyes, Uldyssian, only in your eyes...”

Despite their unusual night visitor having shown no hostility, Uldyssian did not rest well. He expected other strange beings to follow in the wake of the first, some of them surely with more sinister intent. Yet, the day came without incident. The party ate what was left of the meat, then set out again.

“How far is Toraja’s region now?” he asked his brother as they rode.

“Several days yet,” Mendeln replied. Further information, he did not supply and Uldyssian settled back into the saddle. He was already sick of the jungle and continually sick of himself.

Small creatures flittered through the branches, some of them recognizable, others almost as unsettling as the behemoth. However, Uldyssian sensed that these were simple animals, not some mysterious, intelligent being, such as had confronted him.

What did the confrontation mean? He refused to believe that Achilios was right. There was nothing to Uldyssian. He was a fraud, a mockery.

With such thoughts, he rode through the day and on into the night. They traveled late, it taking Achilios some time to find a clearing large enough for them to use as a place to sleep.

Uldyssian had no desire to leave the safety of the campsite, but, as ever, the hunt for firewood demanded it of him and the others. He tried to keep close, this time, but the pickings were slight and

necessity once more demanded he widen his search.

With growing wariness, Uldyssian gathered one piece after another. Each moment, he expected the giant to confront him, but the closest he had come to an encounter so far was an irate toad the size of his head that leapt out from under a dead branch Uldyssian had just grabbed.

Uldyssian returned with his arms full and his mood as black as the night. He ate sparingly from Achilios's newest catch—some sort of huge rabbit—then slept fitfully until a hand shook him awake.

Believing it to be the behemoth, Uldyssian jerked back. However, it was only the hunter, awaking him for his turn on guard duty.

"Easy there!" Achilios muttered. "Are you sure you want to take watch?"

"I'd rather be up."

"As you like."

Uldyssian grabbed his sword and walked to the edge of the camp. As was the practice, he kept watch first from one vantage point, then, after a few minutes, quietly went to another. In this way, he also kept more alert.

Eventually, however, time did take its toll. When he was certain that he dared not stay on watch any longer, Uldyssian sheathed his sword and went to wake Mendeln, who was next. After Mendeln would come Serenthia and then Achilios again, if necessary. The three men would have preferred to rotate the night between them, but Serenthia had insisted, pointing out that she was just as capable with a sword as they were...a piece of training done at the insistence of her late father.

Uldyssian approached his brother's location...only to find Mendeln not there. That was not uncommon, necessity making its demands whenever it chose. He paused, aware that it could not be too long.

But after several minutes, there was still no sign of Mendeln.

Uldyssian tried to tell himself that it would only be a moment longer, but then that moment passed and still there was no hint of his brother's return. Uldyssian glanced at the ground and made out a single footprint. Not yet wishing to disturb the others, he drew his weapon and started in the direction that the print was pointing.

The way was troublesome. He was forced to hack at the branches. Twice Uldyssian whispered Mendeln's name, both times to no success.

His heart pounding faster, Uldyssian doubled his pace. Mendeln *had* to have come this way.

A slight sound from the side made him pause. When it came again, he turned toward it. It might be his brother, but it also might be something more sinister.

Or...it could be the creature again.

Despite the risk, Uldyssian pushed on. Mendeln was out here; that was what mattered most. If it was the creature, then perhaps it could even help him. The thought seemed ludicrous, yet, Uldyssian knew that if he ran into the jungle dweller, he *would* ask it for aid.

From a slightly different direction came more movement. Uldyssian froze. A breath later, from yet a third direction there was a noise.

Whatever lurked out here, there was more than one.

Images of morlu swept through his head. Uldyssian considered retreating to the camp, but it was already too late. He heard more activity in the jungle, all of it converging on his location.

A murky form moved among the trees, then another, and another. Ducking low, Uldyssian closed on the nearest. Despite his failures, he had no intention of merely standing still as the fiends slaughtered him and his companions. Even if he could kill but one, it would be some small victory...and all Uldyssian could ask for.

The black form assisted him by veering his way. As the figure neared, Uldyssian noted that the head was unencumbered by the monstrous ram's skull helmet of the Temple's infernal minions.

Peace Warders, then. Or perhaps even Inquisitors. The Cathedral of Light had been oddly silent all this time, even though Uldyssian was certain that they were still interested in him.

His adversary was now so near that he could hear the rapid breathing. In fact, had Uldyssian not known better, he would have sworn that the warrior sounded uneasy, even a little frightened.

Taking some grim pleasure in that, Uldyssian maneuvered around the figure. A little more and they would both be in position.

The dark form abruptly changed direction again, this time striding directly toward where Uldyssian hid.

Unwilling to wait any longer, the son of Diomedes leapt at him.

What should have been a quick, mortal thrust failed utterly, his foe avoiding it by accidentally stumbling to the side. The two men became entangled. Their weapons fell at the same time. Uldyssian cursed, knowing that such a loss meant far more to him than it did the other. He was surrounded by enemy, his one chance to in some small way redeem himself now all but gone.

His fighting became more frantic. By sheer force alone, he managed to end up on top. His hands grappled for the guard's throat.

But before Uldyssian could make good his hope, other hands pulled him off of his intended victim. His arms were wrapped behind his back. The area filled with armed figures.

Someone brought a torch. It was thrust in his face, no doubt so that he could be identified for the sake of some high cleric of one of the

sects.

“’Tis him!” a harsh voice declared.

Uldyssian expected to be clapped in irons...but instead his arms were released. The figures surrounding him stepped back.

And, one by one, they went down on their knees, leaving only the torchbearer. The man held the flames close to his own face as he stared at Uldyssian.

“Praise be! We’ve found you, Holy One!” blurted *Romus*.

TWENTY-ONE

Mendeln had awakened with the feeling that someone had just called his name. At first, he thought it his brother and that made him stand up and look around. But when Mendeln saw no sign of Uldyssian, his suspicions grew.

Then, the voice called to him again.

This way... it beckoned. *This way...*

Somehow, he knew exactly which direction to go. Not for a moment did Mendeln hesitate. He had finally gone beyond fear of his situation. Fascination commanded him now.

Making certain that no one observed him, he slipped into the jungle. Curiously, Mendeln felt more at home here than he ever had back in Seram. It was as if this was a cherished place that Uldyssian's brother had forgotten until now.

Treading with a nimbleness generally absent, Mendeln dove deeper into the jungle. The voice kept urging him on, telling him where to turn. He followed its guidance with the utmost trust.

The insects kept their distance from him, just as they had since shortly after he and his companions had entered the lush land. They had quickly sensed the change in him, the *otherness*, that Mendeln was only just beginning to understand.

Despite the dark, he found it not at all difficult to see. Things were shadowed, true, but his vision was sharper than ever. Indeed, in some ways, Mendeln could see better than he did even during the day. His surroundings had more definition, more distinction.

Turn...turn... the voice commanded. Mendeln obeyed, took several steps, then waited.

But the voice gave him no more instructions.

Frowning, he took one more step—

And suddenly, in front of him stood a towering, glittering obelisk untouched by the incessant growth. It stood more than twice as tall as Mendeln and was made of what he suspected was obsidian. Mendeln had admired samples of the black stone that Cyrus had bought from a merchant and felt that what stood before him could be nothing else.

Yet, what drew his attention most was not the pointed obelisk itself, but what was carved on each of its faces.

More words in the ancient script.

They ran from the top to the bottom and as he eyed them, it almost seemed that they glowed faintly. Mendeln mouthed them as best he could, recognizing enough symbols to have some crude notion of what others might mean.

As he read, his understanding grew. Becoming excited, he poured over the first face again and again. Each time, the message proved clearer. His expression transformed into that akin to a child, for what was written there filled him with awe.

And so, Mendeln kept reading...

Uldyssian stared in disbelief at the man before him. Romus, the criminal. Romus, the converted.

"What—what're you doing here?" Uldyssian demanded. His gaze flickered to the few faces partially visible around them. He recognized most. They were *all* from Partha.

"When you were found missing, Holy One, we feared for the worst, especially after how it was for poor Master Ethon and his boy! Nicodemus, he's a good tracker and some of the others're, too! We took off as soon as we could after you!" Romus grinned. "But you're all right!"

"You shouldn't have followed," Uldyssian reprimanded the men. "You endanger yourselves...and what of your families?"

"All of us came willingly," someone else said. "And our families are all with us, of course! We'd not abandon them! Isn't that right?"

There was a chorus of ayes. For the first time, Uldyssian noticed that some of the figures toward the back of the dark throng were of slighter builds. Several were fairly short. He had not thought of them as women or, for that matter, children.

But *why* bring their families with them on such a desperate pursuit?

A sick feeling swelled up within him. "*Why* are you all here, Romus?"

"Why, to learn more from you, Holy One! To follow your path, wherever it takes you!" Others backed up his declaration.

"Don't *call* me that!" Uldyssian blurted. "Never that!"

Romus bowed his head. "Very sorry, Master Uldyssian! I'd forgotten, yes!"

Gritting his teeth, Uldyssian continued, "You uprooted your families to follow me? Are you mad?"

Almost as one, they shook their heads. He eyed the townsfolk, aware that his fury barely touched them. They were utterly insane, but could not see that fact.

But as it became apparent that he had nothing more to teach them,

they would surely come to their senses...and then it would be *they* who would become outraged with him.

Mendeln still concerned Uldyssian, but he needed to deal with this band first. "How many are there of you, Romus?"

"A good quarter of Partha stands around you, Master Uldyssian, and others but await word of our success before they join us!"

The sick feeling swelled a hundredfold. Barely able to think, Uldyssian whirled back toward the camp. "Follow me."

"Always," murmured Romus.

Already regretting his choice of words, the son of Diomedes stalked away. Behind him came a mass shuffling of feet and the shaking of grass and branches.

As he neared the edge of the camp, Achilios—an arrow notched and ready to fire—stood sternly waiting. His face went through a contortion of emotions as he drank in what came in his friend's wake.

"What've you found out there? An army?"

"The Parthans...or, at least, a good number of them."

Achilios looked from one newcomer to the next. "Is there anyone left there?"

"Too few." Uldyssian looked around. "Where's Mendeln?"

"I assumed with you."

"I noticed him rise at one point," Serenthia piped up from near the fire. She, too, eyed the Parthans with wonder. "I fell asleep again almost immediately, though."

It was not what Uldyssian had wanted to hear. "He's been gone too long. I need to go back out and search for him."

Leaning close, the archer whispered, "Then, why not use this bunch? I can only assume that they came after you and, from the looks of those admiring expressions, if you asked them to hunt for your brother, they would!"

"And half of them would get eaten while the others would likely die of accidents or some disease! They understand nothing about the jungle!"

"Nor do we, but we chose to come here, nonetheless."

As the two argued, more and more people flowed into the tiny site. The women and children became apparent now, they moving closest to the single fire. Some of the men came bearing wood, which they used to build other fires for their numbers.

Numbers which continued to grow.

"You're certain that it's only a *part* of the town?" Achilios asked.

"For now..." Uldyssian spotted Bartha and her son. The woman smiled, then leaned down to point out him to her child. The boy waved merrily. Uldyssian could not help but wave back, but his heart

grew heavier. Their faith was based on lies.

Romus joined him again. There was absolutely none of the distrust and unsavoriness of the man Uldyssian had first viewed from a distance in Partha's square.

"Master Uldyssian, would it be permissible to have them start cooking meals and clearing more ground?"

"You have food?" He prayed that they did not somehow expect him to magically supply them with anything.

"Oh, yes! We knew that we might have to travel some distance to catch up to you! There are horses laden with packs just coming up now."

Sure enough, in addition to the throng of people, more than a score of heavily encumbered mounts were already in sight. Uldyssian could scarcely believe what he was seeing. How could such a large party have organized so quickly, much less followed him so expertly?

And they all expect the world from you, came the thought. *They all expect you to teach them to become more powerful than the mage clans...*

The immensity of what he was supposed to do—especially in light of the fact that it was utterly beyond him—struck Uldyssian so hard that he turned from the others without another word and stalked off into the jungle. He did not go far, naturally, but just enough to find some peace.

Or at least, attempt to. Even alone, Uldyssian could not escape his feelings of failure, of complete shame. They ate away at him with an intensity he had not experienced previously. In his mind, he heard the voices speaking so reverently about him, saw again the awed faces, both young and old. Bartha's son came unbidden to his memory, the boy and his mother seeing him as some mythic healer when the truth was that it had been a demoness who had given the child a new life.

Lylia. How she would have laughed at his situation. In fact, it was very likely that she watched from somewhere, enjoying his torment and the eventual chaos when the Parthans discovered the awful truth about him. Lylia had called him *nothing* and he was seeing the truth of her words more and more with each passing moment.

Perhaps the temptress had even silently urged the townsfolk to this foolish trek, whispering in their ears that they had to follow. That could explain their swift and certain path. How better to ensure the greatest depths to his downfall than to bring all the elements together herself? Once more, he had underestimated her retribution.

"You've got what you want!" Uldyssian shouted at the darkness. "Now leave me be!"

No one responded, of course. He had not expected it. She wanted him completely humiliated, perhaps even slain. If Uldyssian was torn

apart by his enraged followers, Lylia would simply find herself a new puppet.

You thought that you would bring down the masters of Sanctuary. You thought that the Triune and the Cathedral of Light would fall, so that you could finally rid yourself of the demons of your past.

Uldyssian shuddered, thinking how he had even failed anew his lost loved ones. Their memories would be tainted by his debacle. When people recalled his family, it would be with curses and dark thoughts.

"I only wanted to help," the son of Diomedes muttered. "Only wanted things to make sense."

To his ever distraught mind, the calls of the jungle's nocturnal denizens began to sound like mocking laughter. Uldyssian almost turned and headed back to camp, but then recalled what he would find there. He looked at his shadowed surroundings, seeking *some* escape.

There is always the Triune. At first, the thought startled Uldyssian, but as he considered it, it made some sense. True, before it had been the suggestion of Malic, but now Uldyssian considered what would happen if he willingly walked into the main temple and gave himself over to them. There would be no more running. The Parthans would initially grow angry when they discovered his duplicity, but then they would feel justice had been served. Uldyssian did not care what happened to himself at that point, only that no one else would be affected anymore.

Perhaps it would even be best to lead the Parthans to the Temple, too. Let them see the truth there for themselves.

Uldyssian grimaced. It said something for his state of mind that he had thought of such an outrageous thing for even a moment. Uldyssian shook his head, trying to clear it. What he chose to do concerning himself was one thing, but he would not lead the Parthans through any more deceit...and he would certainly not lead them to the Temple.

Yet, if Uldyssian intended to cut all ties with those following him, it behooved him to do so as quickly as possible. However, once he returned to the camp, they would be with him waking and sleeping. It would almost be better, Uldyssian thought, if he just never returned at all.

Never returned at all...Perhaps this time, it would work.

His feet began moving even before his mind registered the action. Uldyssian shoved aside the thick branches, pushing as fast as he could through the jungle. On the one hand, he knew that his abrupt flight was even more insane than the one from Partha, but on the other, it would catch everyone unaware. They would have no idea where to

look, where to go. He defied their best trackers—Achilios included—to keep on his heels in this thick vegetation.

But as Uldyssian tore his way through the night, he began to wonder how far he would get without a mount. A horse could at least barge through the jungle easier and surely there would be emptier trails ahead where a rider could quickly pick up the pace. If only he had thought of taking one with him.

But that was something well beyond hope now. Unable to do anything else and feeling as if all depended on him running and running until he could run no more, Uldyssian moved blindly through the jungle. Each moment, he expected shouts to arise and pursuit to begin...

A large form moved through the vegetation just ahead.

Uldyssian tried to slow, but the ground was soft and moist and his footing failed. He tumbled forward, landing on his face.

There was a heavy snort. A muzzle prodded his shoulder.

Wiping dirt from his eyes, Uldyssian beheld a towering white horse. Loose reins dangled under the thick neck. The animal was also saddled and Uldyssian could only surmise that this was a Parthan steed lost during the trek through the jungle.

Seizing the reins, he murmured to the horse, reassuring it that he was no danger. The mount actually seemed grateful to have him near, the unknown landscape no doubt putting it ill at ease.

Thanking his good fortune, Uldyssian started to mount—

“No! Keep away from it!”

Startled by the voice, his foot slipped free. The horse snorted violently, as if furious at the interruption. It moved away from the direction of the caller, pulling Uldyssian—who still gripped the reins—with him.

“Easy! Easy!” Forcing the animal to halt, Uldyssian turned to face the one who had spoken.

The face was so pale that even in the dark jungle he could make out some of its detail. The figure strode toward him with urgency, but also a smooth movement that seemed right at home in their surroundings.

“Mendeln?” Somehow, Uldyssian could not quite be certain that he was actually seeing his brother. This was Mendeln...but somehow, it was *not*.

“Uldyssian...” Mendeln’s voice was low and so steady it again made the older sibling wonder if what he saw was truth or illusion. “Uldyssian...keep away from that creature. It is not what it seems...”

The only “creature” near them was the horse, which, to Uldyssian’s eyes and hand, was certainly what it seemed. He could not entirely say the same for the figure approaching him. Memories of the foul

work of Malic returned.

"Keep back!" he demanded of Mendeln. "Keep back!"

"Uldyssian...it is me."

"I don't know that..." His head pounded. *It cannot be him! It cannot be Mendeln! A demon, perhaps! Let him come closer. The knife...use the knife when he is in range...*

"Do not listen to him," the possible Mendeln quietly said. "I do not understand what he tells you, but I know it to be vile."

Uldyssian frowned. The pounding was becoming worse with each beat of his heart. "Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Yes, you cannot see him as he truly is. He leans at your shoulder, murmuring like a lover, but giving only hate. I think he knows her, Uldyssian, for he has a look to him akin to her."

Her. In Uldyssian's mind, that could mean only one person. "Lylia?"

"That is what you called her, yes. Do you also remember how you finally saw her?"

Uldyssian had once believed that he could never forget Lylia's true form, but now, no matter how hard he tried to summon it, he could not. "I...No...Keep away from me!"

"Uldyssian...it is me. Your brother Mendeln. Look closely. See my eyes. Remember all we have been through. Remember the pain and suffering of the plague as our father, mother, and our brothers and sisters were eaten away by it..."

As the figure spoke, his tone changed. It remained low and overall steady, but there were hints of deep pain that mirrored what lay within Uldyssian's own soul.

He knew then that this *had* to be his brother, not some demon wearing Mendeln's flesh.

That made him release the reins...or at least, Uldyssian *tried* to release them. His fingers would not uncurl. In fact, if anything, they tightened their grip, defying his will.

The white steed snorted, then renewed its efforts to pull him away from Mendeln.

His brother uttered something unintelligible. The horse suddenly reared, shrieking as no earthly animal could. Its form twisted in a manner that should have snapped the spine in half. Yet, the creature seemed more furious than pained.

"Pull free now, Uldyssian! Lean against the reins and pull with all your will!"

Uldyssian immediately obeyed. His one hand continued to clutch the reins even as the enraged horse twisted as if made of soft bread dough. Its orbs blazed red and no longer had pupils. The mane coursing down its neck and over its shoulders had a thorny cast to it

now. Despite its girth, the creature stood upon its hind legs as if more accustomed to moving in that fashion.

Still his fingers would not free themselves. Uldyssian tugged as hard as he could, using his strength to its utmost.

Then, something Mendeln had said came back to him. The younger brother had used the word “will,” not “strength.” Mendeln had been so specific...

Relaxing slightly, Uldyssian focused on wanting to be separated from the reins. He concentrated on his fingers, seeking *control*.

His grip loosened. He immediately whirled, his hand flinging free.

And as it did, the beast next to him lost all semblance of a horse. It reshaped, growing slightly smaller. The demonic aspects also transformed, at least, to a point, the thorns becoming hair and the body more human.

Before him now stood a tall, kindly figure with flowing, gray hair and a trim beard. As he smiled at Uldyssian, he extended his arms.

“You have proven very worthy, my son. Come and accept my blessing for your stalwart efforts.”

“What—who are you?”

“Why, I am the Primus, of course.” The smile dazzled. “But you may call me *Lucion*.”

Uldyssian looked aghast. “The Primus! Lucion!”

The figure nodded. “Yes, Lucion...and I understand that the demoness Lilith has been spreading false witness concerning me.”

“Lilith? You mean *Lydia*?”

“Lilith is her true name, an evil older than the world! She is the mother of deceit, the mistress of betrayal! You are indeed strong for having survived against her, my son.”

From behind Uldyssian, Mendeln said, “Beware, brother. False images are legion where this one is concerned.”

Before Uldyssian could respond, the Primus calmly replied, “Does that actually sound like the Mendeln you know? Have you not noticed the dark changes in him of late? There are more demons in the world than merely Lilith, my son...and one of them has cast his shadow over your sibling.”

Uldyssian looked back. “Mendeln?”

“I am still me.”

What exactly that meant, Uldyssian did not know. He considered all that he had seen happen to his brother. Mendeln had definitely changed, but was it for good or ill?

“I do not know you, demon,” Lucion remarked, sounding much like a protective uncle to Uldyssian. “But your intent is clear. You would work at the soul of this worthy one, burrow into it through one of

those nearest and dearest to him. That cannot be permitted. He is under my protection.”

“Protection?” Mendeln returned. “As the high priest Malic sought to protect him with his spells of skin-flaying and his bloodthirsty morlu?”

“Exactly. Malic’s. I regret his actions immensely. I was unaware that one so close to me had been seduced by demons. I had sent him to invite Uldyssian ul-Diomed to visit the temple as my guest. To be honored, nothing more.” He considered further. “The morlu are an abomination created by what is called the Cathedral of Light, not the Triune. It must be from there that came the demon who turned poor Malic.”

There was something about the Primus that made Uldyssian want to believe him. Yet, bits of what he said did not sound true.

“The only demon here stands before us, Uldyssian,” Mendeln insisted, stepping between his brother and Lucion. “You must believe.”

The master of the Triune shook his head. “His words are strong, embellished as they are by sorcery. For your sake, I fear I must remove the taint. I am sorry for your loss, dear Uldyssian, but there is no choice.”

It took Uldyssian a moment to understand. When he did, he reached out in sudden panic. “No! Mendeln—”

A circle of silver light formed around the Primus, then immediately burst forth. It struck where Mendeln had been standing...and suddenly, Uldyssian’s brother was no longer *there*.

Both Uldyssian and Lucion eyed the empty spot, then the Primus remarked, “Fear for your brother, Uldyssian. The demon is powerful. It has taken him away from here. It would be best if we joined together, fought him side by side—”

“No.” Uldyssian was not quite certain what was going on with Mendeln, but he refused to believe that his brother had become some vessel for evil. He also now refused to believe much of what the Primus had told him concerning Malic. The high priest had been too adamant when it came to speaking about his master. Malic had been a loyal follower, not a betrayer, of the Primus. “No. Leave me alone.”

“Dear Brother Uldyssian—”

Something pressed against Uldyssian’s brain. Gritting his teeth, he stepped back from the glistening figure. “Leave me alone! I want nothing of you or the Cathedral of Light! Nothing at all!”

He spun from Lucion. Uldyssian was not certain just where he headed, but he knew somehow that he needed to be away quickly.

There was a flaring of light behind him, as he recalled had happened just before Mendeln’s odd vanishing. Even as Uldyssian ran,

he steeled himself for the inevitable.

The force that struck him was oddly cold. He felt as if his body was twisted inside out. His legs, his arms, refused to function, both the muscle and bone seemingly turned to jelly.

Uldyssian collapsed against a tree, then tumbled to the jungle floor.

“Perhaps you are actually nothing, as my sister said,” Lucion commented clinically. “Perhaps there is nothing to Uldyssian ul-Diomed.”

A tingling surrounded the barely conscious Uldyssian. The ground beneath him suddenly grew distant. Vaguely, the son of Diomedes realized that he was floating several feet above it.

“I shall have to test you and retest you to be certain. Let the morlu play with you, too. They tend to bring out the desire for survival, which should, in turn, bring out the power of the nephalem...if it is truly stirring within you.”

“There...is nothing,” Uldyssian gasped. “I am no...threat to you...”

“But you never were, human. I am Lucion, son of *Mephisto*, the greatest of the Prime Evils! Blood of my kind may flow through your veins, but it’s watered down with the puerile emptiness of Inarius’s ilk!”

Uldyssian’s view shifted as he floated toward his captor. Lucion still wore the semblance of the Primus, but Uldyssian very much believed that the horrific glances he had seen during the earlier transformation had been nearer to the truth.

What had Lucion said of Lylia—*Lilith*? That she was his...*sister*?

“Yes, test you and retest you so that there is no mistake,” the demon repeated. He smiled, and although his face was yet human, the sharp teeth and forked tongue were not. “And if you fail...then I will just feed you to the morlu...still alive, of course.”

And although Lucion continued to smile, Uldyssian knew that he was not in any way jesting.

TWENTY-TWO

Achilios had let Uldyssian go without hesitation, aware that his friend was under incredible pressure. The startling arrival of so many people from Partha was enough to even disturb the archer. He was astounded by their dedication, even to someone whom Achilios himself would have trusted with his life.

His thoughts were interrupted by Serenthia, who suddenly gasped and turned in the direction that he had last seen Uldyssian go. Barely had she done so when he, too, sensed that there was something terribly wrong going on.

Something involving Uldyssian *and* Mendeln.

“Stay here!” he shouted at her. Racing past startled townsfolk, the archer unlooped his bow. He knew that the jungle presented an even trickier environment than his native forest, but all he asked for was one clean shot. That was all he needed.

Providing, of course, that he was not already too late.

“I wanted to do this in quiet, in private, so that others with a possible interest in the nephalem would not take notice,” Lucion remarked to his helpless captive. “There are so many others who would be interested, yes. And, besides, anything my dear sister takes an interest in is deserving of such caution.”

His eyes were no longer human and reminded Uldyssian too much of Lilith’s. They appraised the farmer again and again, seeking that which Uldyssian himself felt was not there.

“She is cunning and her mind is like a labyrinth. I wasn’t too sad when I learned, centuries later, that the angel had cast her out into the endless void, never to return.” He laughed. “Well, ‘never’ is a relative term with her. Inarius should’ve known better. He should have slain her, but his kind always was too sentimental.”

A sudden crackle of blue energy engulfed Uldyssian. He let out a cry, but the sound was smothered.

If this told Lucion anything, he did not reveal it. Instead, the demon nodded to himself, then said, “There remains only the question of your brother and what has a hold over *him*. I lied about so many things, but not that. Something of a demonic nature does hold sway

over him...and yet it's also something else. Perhaps, I'll make a study of both of you. Would you like that?"

"Damn you!"

"Thank you, I already am. Shall we go?"

Lucion smiled wider and the world around Uldyssian took on a hazy, insubstantial appearance. Somewhere in the background, the faint images of the interior of some great structure—the main temple, Uldyssian assumed with a shock—began to form.

And, at that moment—the scene illuminated by the energy surrounding Uldyssian—a feathered bolt struck the Primus directly in the throat.

Lucion's head swung back from the force. Blood spilled from the ugly wound. The head of the arrow lay embedded so deep it was a wonder to Uldyssian that it had not come out in the back.

"Uldyssian!" called Achilios. "Try to free yourself!"

He had been attempting just that since his capture, only to fail miserably each time. Uldyssian had used Mendeln's advice again, but to no avail. He began to wonder if it had merely been by chance and whatever power his brother had wielded that he had escaped then. As ever, Lylia's mocking words returned. He was nothing...nothing...

A whistling sound presaged another arrow soaring at Lucion. Knowing Achilios's skill, Uldyssian had no doubt that it would hit exactly where the archer intended.

But at the last second, Lucion's hand caught the bolt just an inch from his chest. He easily snapped it in two and, as the pieces fell, reached up to take the one buried in his throat.

The Primus pulled at the arrow. With a horrific sucking sound, it came free. He inhaled and the blood dripping from his wound receded into the gap, which then healed shut.

From somewhere to Uldyssian's left, Achilios let out a curse, then growled, "Not again!"

Lucion eyed the blood still on the tip of the arrow. His tongue shot out and lapped up the red liquid, leaving the arrow perfectly clean. The demon chuckled as he tossed the shaft to the side.

"Able to make a perfect strike at night even from a bow enchanted to miss! A fine morlu you would make," he said. "Would you like to join us?"

The Primus gestured. Achilios grunted. Uldyssian heard the shuffling of feet and guessed that the hunter was being forced forward.

"I've not had this much activity in centuries," their captor mocked. "I'd forgotten how delicious it was doing it myself instead of relying on fallible mortals..."

Without warning, a different missile came at him. However, where Achilios's arrow had struck true, this one—a rock—bounced away after hitting what seemed an invisible shield around Lucion.

That, though, did not stop a storm of more rocks, bits of wood, and other, unidentifiable objects. Many were tossed with terrible aim, but several others would have hit their target if not for the same force that had repelled the first rock.

And from all through the jungle, completely surrounding the trio, the people of Partha, led by Cyrus's daughter, emerged.

"Let him go!" shouted Serenthia. "Let them both go!"

Others took up the shout, Romus among their leaders. The townsfolk brandished crude spears, axes, and pitchforks, the weapons of the common people. Several more objects flew at the Primus, with the same lack of result.

For the first time, something other than arrogance filled the demon's visage. He surveyed the throng with tremendous interest.

"Impressive!" Lucion boomed. "I didn't sense their coming until just before the first stone cast!" He eyed Uldyssian again. "Could it be you...or maybe your brother?" The gaze narrowed. "No, I think it has something to do with you, pawn of my sister! I sense a connection spreading between *all* of these others, but originating...yes, that would make sense...it would have to be because of..." Lucion trailed off in thought.

Apparently taking this for hesitation, Romus let out a yell and led several of his fellows forward.

Lucion stared at his oncoming attackers with bemusement.

The ground around him erupted. People, trees, dirt—nothing escaped. An explosion ripped apart the jungle for yards around. Screams filled the air and the night was momentarily blindingly bright.

Uldyssian did not fear for his own life, for not only would he have rather died at that moment, but the demon kept him protected. He was the only one, though, and his heart wailed at the thought of what was happening to all those who had come here because of him.

It seemed to never end and yet, Lucion's spell in truth lasted but the blink of an eye. When it was done, there stood not a tree within twenty paces and the ground not only crackled black, but underneath there was a fiery glow, as if the demon had, in the process, summoned up the anger of the world. The jungle had always been hot and humid, but now the very air burned.

"A taste of what is to come," Lucion stated to no one in particular. "When this world is made over in our image."

Moans arose. Uldyssian smelled something horrible, something that

he had not smelled since his family's death. The acrid stench of burning corpses. Yet, these were not plague victims being incinerated to protect the living; these were innocent folk who had perished for no good reason but that they had believed Uldyssian's naive promises.

Something within him wrenched tight. An overwhelming tangle of emotions swept through Uldyssian. He relived every mistake, every catastrophe. With an anguished cry, Uldyssian struggled to free himself.

Struggled...and failed again.

"I see you're as anxious to return to the Temple as I am," jested Lucion. The towering figure surveyed the carnage he had caused. The fiery cracks in the ground illuminated his face with ghastly perfection. "And since there really is nothing of value left here, we might as well go now, don't you think?"

But even as he spoke, another shaft struck him in the chest. However, unlike the first, this one bounced off with no visible effect.

Out of the corner of his eye, Uldyssian saw Achilios quickly notching another arrow. The blond archer kept his gaze on the demon as he worked.

Lucion tsked. "I said that you would make a splendid morlu, but to do that, you must die."

Achilios fired.

"And so you shall," continued his target.

The arrow curved around in midflight. Achilios stumbled back, one arm going up in defense—

The bolt caught him through the throat, exactly where the demon had been hit...but where Lucion was a demon, Achilios was only mortal.

A scream echoed through the ruined jungle. However, it came not from the hunter, but rather Serenthia. As Achilios crumpled into a limp heap, Cyrus's daughter ran to him. She caught him just before he would have struck his head on an overturned tree.

"Oh, Achilios, no! No!"

The man in her arms had no words for her, and his gaze was empty. He had died instantly, although not due to any kindness on Lucion's part.

The Primus now extended a hand toward Serenthia. "How delicious! Come to me, my dear. Let me comfort you in your loss."

She struggled to maintain hold of Achilios as she was pulled forward by the demon's sorcery. Lucion's power dragged her across steaming, molten gaps and ragged patches of burnt ground. Serenthia was finally unable to maintain her grip and the limp body of the hunter was left behind.

It was all coming to an end now. Uldyssian's humiliation had brought with it the death of his friends and his brother—he had to assume that Mendeln was no more or else where *was* he?—and Serry was, like him, to be a victim of another sort.

It might have been different if the power he had thought he wielded had been truth. Then, Uldyssian could have at least tried to make a stand, possibly save his friends from sharing his fate. However, he was no threat to Lucion. He was nothing...nothing...

His gaze passed from the desperate Serenthia to Achilios's cold body and back again. They had fought for him, more than once. They had believed in him, just as so many had.

One of the Parthans suddenly ran up to help Cyrus's daughter. Romus, face disfigured far more than ever, took hold of her with burnt hands. Another Parthan joined him, then another. Their added mass slowed but did not halt her progress. Lucion merely laughed at their antics.

But as he laughed, a score more Parthans tried to charge him again. This time, they had weapons other than their axes and pitchforks.

They used what some would have described as magic.

Around the Primus, the air became a cornucopia of violent energies. Rocks appeared out of nowhere. A tree limb went flying at Lucion's handsome face, only to go bounding back.

Among the fighters was Bartha, who had tears in her eyes and a grim set to her mouth. Uldyssian noted with dismay that there was no sign of her son. He prayed that the boy was somewhere farther back, unharmed.

"The potential is there," Lucion commented, nodding at his attackers in approval despite their dismal results. "But I think I'd prefer to test just the one and train others from scratch. Less to unteach!" He said the last with a dark gaze at the Parthans.

The jungle floor burst open around Bartha's group. The fiery, molten earth below it engulfed her and several of the others. Their screams filled Uldyssian's ears—

"NO!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. His eyelids clamped together tightly as tears coursed down over his face. He beat his fists against the soil, repeating his anguished call. **"NO!"**

It took Uldyssian a breath to notice that the rest of the area had fallen into silence again. He worried that the carnage Lucion had earlier wrought now faded in comparison to what had just happened. Tears continuing to streak down his face, the son of Diomedes opened his eyes.

To his surprise, he beheld Bartha and the others untouched. A wall of formerly molten ground rose around them, yet, it had obviously

cooled completely, for one of the Parthans began cracking open the side with his foot and fist.

Uldyssian gave thanks for the miracle, then discovered two more. One was that Serenthia no longer helplessly moved toward Lucion. Instead, Romus and the others with him even now carried her away.

The final—and to him in some ways most astonishing—miracles concerned himself.

Uldyssian no longer floated in the air. Only now did it register with him that he had been pounding his fists, that he knelt on the ground.

That *he*, not Lucion, had made it so.

Lilith had lied to Uldyssian...which should not have surprised him. He could guess now that the reason he had been so unable to fight her had been because of what he had once thought her to be. She had used that to crush his spirit further.

Uldyssian pushed himself up on one knee. His gaze grew terrible as he looked at his persecutor. The treacheries of Lucion and Lilith combined in his mind to further fuel his determination.

"No more..." the once-simple farmer intoned, rising. "No more of this."

The Primus did not smile now and there was that in his face that hinted more than ever of his true, monstrous self. "You'd do well not to provoke me, mortal. This kind and civilized exterior is a shell, nothing more. You do not want to anger what lurks just beneath..."

Shaking his head, Uldyssian returned, "You have it all wrong, Primus...Lucion...brother of Lilith. You should be careful not to provoke *me*, anymore."

This caused the demon to howl with laughter, but Uldyssian could almost swear that there was something hollow to that laughter. There had been no reason why Lucion would have lessened his control over the human. Uldyssian had freed himself and that meant that the gift... no, *birthright*, Lilith had called it...flowed through him much as he had once believed it. Perhaps not as powerful and as malleable as it had seemed, but certainly Lilith *had* lied when she had said he was nothing without her.

"Leave now," Uldyssian suggested sharply. "Leave now or finish it here."

Lucion ceased laughing.

The ground erupted anew, this time the force of it all centering around Uldyssian. Hot ash rose up, covering him. Scalding earth bathed his body. As the ground crumbled, he started to sink beneath it.

Uldyssian took one stubborn step toward his adversary. When that succeeded, he took another. He paid no mind to the ash, to the fire-

hot ground...and because of that, they did not harm him.

In the back of his thoughts, Uldyssian sensed those who had survived the demon's assaults gaining their own strength from his renewed confidence. There were more alive and well than he could have hoped. That, in turn, gave Uldyssian the impetus he needed to take another step, then another.

And when he had crossed half the distance, it was to note with amusement of his own Lucion taking an unconscious step *back*.

"Will you not give me your blessing after all, Primus? A blessing such as your servant Malic gave the good Master Ethon, his son, and others?" The amusement vanished, replaced by disgust. "You seem to favor it..."

"I will give you my blessing," the demon croaked, his voice no longer at all cultured or even, for that matter, sounding human. "And then...I will dine on your entrails and drink your blood from a cup fashioned from your fragile skull..."

And as he spoke, the facade of humanity fell away. Lucion's aspect grew terrible to behold, even more so to Uldyssian because there was resemblance to Lilith after all. Lucion stood half again taller than the demoness and much broader, but he, too, had the thorns that acted as mane all the way down his scaled back. Yet, where she had only had one tail, her cursed brother had *three*, all spiked from top to tip with daggerlike projects longer than Uldyssian's hand.

Lucion took a step toward him again and, in doing so, revealed that he also had the hooved legs his sister did. His hands were different, though, for the fingers on each numbered more than five and the claws were like those of a badger, but dripping with what surely had to be poison.

And of the face, only the eyes were identical. Lucion, who played at being the handsome, schooled cleric, was a beast whose head more resembled a toad. His mouth was wider than the top of his skull, and row upon row of teeth greeted Uldyssian. The brother of Lilith had no nose, not even nostrils, and his chin was hooked so sharply in the middle that Uldyssian could almost imagine it being used as a weapon.

"Well?" rasped the demon, his grin literally growing from ear to ear...the latter long and wide, as if for a creature even larger than he. "Come, Uldyssian ul-Diomed...I'll give you a blessing, definitely..."

Yet, although Lucion was daunting, he no longer instilled fear in the man before him. Only loathing touched Uldyssian, loathing that any such abomination could be allowed to exist in his world long enough to taint it. Surely, it was wrong that such as Lucion walked Sanctuary's—yes, that was the name of the world—lands...

“Then give it to me,” he demanded of the demon. “Give it to me.”

Almost immediately, Uldyssian felt a churning in his stomach, as if the organ itself sought to escape. That sensation was joined by a similar one in his lungs, then his heart. He had no doubt that if he let it happen, then all of them would rip free.

He wondered if Lucion understood what the spell felt like. Would the demon suffer so?

As if his thoughts were action, he saw Lucion suddenly clutch his chest. The demon looked perplexed. Pain was recognizable in his unsettling eyes.

He stared at the human. The turbulence in Uldyssian’s own system ceased. Lucion recovered simultaneously.

The demon hissed. “Little tricks for little creatures...”

Seeing no reason to reply, Uldyssian strode closer yet. He did not know what he intended to do, just that it had to be done and done quickly.

Curiously, the less distance between them, the less Lucion struck him as even a threat. Uldyssian felt a surge of strength adding to his own and knew it to originate from the Parthans and Serenthia. They not only had continued to believe in him throughout all of this, but more than ever were certain that he was what they had thought him.

Understanding and appreciating that, Uldyssian lunged for his horrific foe. What he did now he no longer did for himself in the least; all he cared about were those who followed him.

His audacious attack left the demon stunned, but only for a second. As the two collided, Lucion’s tails flung forward like that of a scorpion’s. They struck Uldyssian across the back—especially the spine—again and again, sinking all the way inside. Yet, each time, they were immediately repelled and the wounds would heal in scarcely a heartbeat. Uldyssian felt a slight discomfort, nothing more.

He managed to seize one tail and, despite the spikes thrust through his palm, tore it off. The demon let out a howl of both pain and outrage. Uldyssian contemptuously threw aside the appendage, then sought another. However, Lucion withdrew them, no doubt to use when it was less likely to lose one or both in the process.

“How was she, my sister?” the master demon murmured as the two of them locked together again. “Was she all that you ever dreamed? All you ever lusted for? Lilith is every creature’s desire, you know. She had so many lovers besides you, but only one did she love...oh, but not you.”

Uldyssian let Lucion talk. The pain of Lilith’s false love still stung deep, but not enough to sway him from what he needed to do. He cared only about stopping his horrific foe.

“She loved only one, yes...and his name is Inarius! You recall it? Did she mutter it in bed when you were with her? Best to bend down before me, human, than before *him*! He would not be so gracious! No, not at all...you would be as nothing to him, nothing at all!”

Nothing. There it was again. Ever Uldyssian was nothing to such beings, just as all humans were nothing to them.

No more, he suddenly thought. *I...we...will no longer be nothing to such as this!*

“I—will—bend to *no one*!” Uldyssian finally retorted. He gripped the demon by the throat. Whatever he hoped to do, he had to do it now. The longer they struggled, the more likely that Lucion would find some weakness to exploit. “Least of all one who is nothing to *me*!” Lilith’s words came back in a rush, only now he saw them as reversed. He was not the nothing; she and those like her brother *were*. “*You are nothing, Lucion, and that is all you deserve to be!*”

The demon started to laugh again, but the laughter turned into a hideous choking. Lucion clutched at the hand holding his throat, but not because Uldyssian squeezed tight. In fact, the human only gripped it enough to keep his monstrous adversary at bay. An overriding desire filled Uldyssian, a desire to see his words become fact.

“Nothing, Lucion...nothing!”

Uldyssian blinked. A pale cast swept over the demon. The harsh colors of his body grew faded, as if somehow bleached. Lucion’s tails abruptly renewed their frenzied assault, but now they did not even pierce the human’s skin. In fact, for all their effort, the tails felt like light touches of wind...and, gradually, not even that.

And then Uldyssian noticed that he could see part of the dark jungle *through* the demon. That encouraged him to press further. He utterly ignored Lucion’s desperately scratching claws, which were no more than the least pinpricks now.

At last, the demon cried, “Beware, Uldyssian ul-Diomed! She is not through with you! My sister never lets go of a toy until it’s chewed ragged! But I know her ways! I can help you! I can act as your guide! I will bow to you, call you ‘master’! Just listen—”

“I hear nothing but the calls of the jungle creatures,” Uldyssian replied with a shake of his head. “And the whisper of wind, now already dying down. *Nothing* more.”

Lucion’s mouth moved, but now no sound came from it. Under Uldyssian’s fingers, scale gave way to empty air. The demon was now transparent. His face wore a contorted look of fear, for he did and did not understand what was happening. What Uldyssian was doing was impossible for any human...but not for a nephalem.

And, at last, the demon became as Uldyssian had said...*nothing*.

The son of Diomedes stood there, his fingers still bent as if holding a throat. Slowly, Uldyssian straightened them, then studied the palms as if seeking some great truth there.

He belatedly sensed a figure cautiously approaching him from behind. Already aware just who it would be, Uldyssian slowly turned. Even then, Romus let out a squeak and stepped back several paces.

“Forgive me, Master Uldyssian! I meant no treachery, coming up on you that way! It’s just...aye, it’s just that you were standing so still there...”

“It’s all right, Romus. It’s all right.”

“Is it over?” asked the Parthan “Is the demon dead?”

“No...he just *isn’t*, at all.”

Romus only looked more confused.

With a sigh, the son of Diomedes said, “The demon is gone forever. We’re all right.”

However, even as he said the last, Uldyssian knew that it was otherwise. Around him, still illuminated by the blazing cracks in the ground, lay the wreckage of the jungle and, worse, the bodies of too many who had followed him here. Some he could see were beyond help, but there were others still clinging to life...

Without thinking, he walked past Romus and went to the first of the injured. The man’s face was vaguely familiar to Uldyssian, but otherwise he only knew him as a Parthan. Still, that was enough, and just the thought of what this one soul had suffered was enough to make an already drained Uldyssian shed tears again.

He reached down to try to better position the injured man...and a soft glow formed under his palms.

The Parthan gasped, his chest swelling to full capacity. Uldyssian nearly pulled his hands away, but then he noticed the bruises and cuts on the man’s face begin to recede. A shoulder that had been bent as if the arm had become separated seemed to mend.

Uldyssian kept his hands where they were until the last of the wounds had faded and the Parthan breathed normally. As he rose, he suddenly noticed that there stood around him other Parthans, all staring in rapt awe.

Reaching out to one with a bleeding scar across her face, Uldyssian repeated the process. When he took his hand away, she, too, was healed.

And so he went from person to person, from those surrounding him to those lying prone on the ground. Uldyssian tried to find those most in need of his assistance and help them first.

How long he took, he only understood when the first light of day filtered through the thick foliage. Exhaustion filled Uldyssian, but so

did excitement. He had managed to help all those who could be helped, despite Lilith's claims to the contrary. Doing so thrilled him more than even overcoming Lucion.

But that thrill evaporated when he finally confronted Serenthia. She still cradled Achilios's head in her arms. Uldyssian had almost approached her once during his night's work, but had felt guilty, knowing that his friend had perished trying to rescue him. Worse, he had known that Achilios was beyond his powers.

There stood another with her, one he had also almost thought dead. Mendeln, as pale as the dead archer, stood somberly over the lovers. He eyed his brother as Uldyssian neared, nodding once.

"You did it. She lied."

"She lied." He started to ask Mendeln about his part in the final moments, but Serenthia chose that moment to look up at the older brother.

"Uldyssian...is there nothing..."

In truth, he had tried once this night to do the unthinkable, tried once, and failed. Uldyssian was not so certain that had been a bad thing, even if it meant no hope for his friends. "I'm sorry. Nothing."

She nodded in understanding, which made his heart ache more for her ordeal.

Mendeln looked past his sibling, to where the Parthans were building a great fire. As was their way, they were preparing to burn the dead. "They should bury them." His gaze grew intense as he focused on the pair again. "At least, we should bury Achilios, do you not agree?"

Although slightly unsettled by Mendeln's determined expression, Uldyssian nodded. That was how it was done in Seram, save when disease demanded otherwise.

Still, it was not his decision to make. "The choice is yours, Serry—Serenthia."

She did not hesitate. "He would prefer to be buried, to be a part of the jungle, if not a forest."

Mendeln smiled grimly. "I know just the place..."

The brothers carried Achilios themselves, with only Cyrus's daughter following. When Romus and a few others sought to come, Uldyssian forbade them. This was a personal matter.

He allowed Mendeln to lead. After some trekking through the thick underbrush, Uldyssian's brother paused at a lush region nearby which could be heard a rushing stream. Tall, thick, and healthy trees surrounded the area. Uldyssian felt a sense of calm pervading the area

and immediately approved of it. Serenthia, too, acknowledged Mendeln's choice as the correct one.

With tools borrowed from the Parthans, the pair dug the grave. Uldyssian considered seeing what he could do with his abilities rather than his hands, then thought how Achilios deserved more effort than that. The ground was soft and surprisingly easy to remove. They soon had a hole deep enough to make certain that no scavengers would dig the body out.

After gently depositing the hunter within and filling up the site, the sons of Diomedes and Serenthia stood in silence. No words were said, for words were inadequate for moments such as this, at least to them. Their souls spoke to the lost one, each bidding him farewell in their own way.

It was Serenthia who finally broke the spell, the dark-tressed woman suddenly turning to Uldyssian and crying in his arms. He held her much the way he had held his little sister during her last days. Mendeln politely turned his face away, at the same time muttering some final message to Achilios.

And then...it was over.

TWENTY-THREE

It took the Parthans the rest of the day to deal with their own dead. Uldyssian and the others attended, naturally. The deaths all struck him hard, but worst were the ones he knew.

Despite his attempt to save her, Uldyssian found out that Bartha was yet among the victims. Her heart, broken by her son's death, could not survive the aftermath. They found her unbreathing, the boy cradled in her arms. In death, they had a peace to their expressions that was complemented by a love between them one could still see. The boy and his mother were laid on the pile together and burned as one.

And as they vanished in flame, the sadness in Uldyssian changed to fury again. Fury at Lilith, at Lucion, at those like the Triune and the Cathedral, who cared for nothing but their dominion over all else at such costs.

Try as he might, Uldyssian could not quell that fury. By the time the last body had been properly burned and the day had once more faded, he knew that there was but one course of action, a course that, for the moment, had a particular focus.

"The Triune must be brought down, Mendeln," he said when they were alone. "I may be mad to think it, but I plan to do what I can to see their temple crumble. They've done too much to too many of us."

He expected his brother to dissuade him, but, instead, Mendeln only said, "If that is what you wish. I will always stand by your side, Uldyssian."

Uldyssian was grateful, but could not let it just end there. "Mendeln...Mendeln...what's happening to you?"

For the first time, a troubled expression briefly crossed his brother's countenance. As Mendeln buried the emotion again, he replied, "I do not know. I can only tell you that I do not fear it anymore...and that, so long as I can, I will do whatever it allows me to help you."

Staring into his brother's eyes, Uldyssian saw no guile there, only honesty. He wanted to demand more of Mendeln, but also saw that to do so would tread on ground neither were quite ready for just yet. When he instead patted Mendeln's shoulder, his sibling looked both relieved and grateful.

"That's all I can ask," the older brother said. "That's all."

He expected Serenthia to condemn him for even thinking of such a plan—Achilios having already paid the price—but the hunter's death had, instead, galvanized the trader's daughter. When Uldyssian told her what he had decided, she showed no hesitation in agreeing.

"My father's dead because of them. Achilios, who foolishly loved me and who I loved for too short, is dead because of them. You want to bring down the Triune...and the Cathedral, too...and I'll be there, Uldyssian! All I ask is that you help me to learn as much as I can, so that I'll be able to stand up at the front of the struggle and pay them for what they've done!"

Her vehement response worried him, for Uldyssian did not want Serenthia throwing herself into danger so that she could rejoin her lost love. He would have said as much, but, Serenthia suddenly turned to the remaining Parthans and shouted, "Uldyssian has spoken! The Triune must pay for all this! We will tear down the temple! Who is with us?"

There was a moment of silence as Romus and the others drank this in...and then determined cheers broke out. "Down with the Temple!" and "Death to the Triune!" filled the jungle.

"Someone must summon the others!" shouted the former cutpurse. "They'll want to join us!"

And, with that, what had began as but a bitter notion in Uldyssian's head became the start of an uprising. He stared at what he had wrought, startled to also realize that he did not regret the fervor of those with him. They were not his followers, not in his opinion, but companions, comrades in suffering who had as much right as him to demand justice...even against demons and other forces.

"This world is ours," he muttered, his words drawing the attention of the shouters. They grew silent, wanting to hear him better. "We are its children! Our existences are intertwined!" He hesitated. "And, most of all, we are our own masters! Our lives are ours to control, no one else's! That is our *birthright* as much as the powers growing within us! Our birthright!"

This brought renewed cheers. Uldyssian let it go on for a time, then raised his hands for silence.

"Romus!" he called. "Are there still among you those who can track well?"

"Aye, Master Uldyssian...and if they can't, I can!"

"We leave at first light, with the city of Toraja as our goal! A good-sized city, Mendeln?"

His brother considered. "It is not Kehjan, but nothing is. Yes, it is a good first destination."

He knew what Uldyssian had in mind. To face the Temple and, very

likely, the Cathedral and the mage clans, their numbers would have to be much greater. Uldyssian had no doubt that there would be those in Toraja who would be open to what he offered.

There would also be those who would oppose him...and so Toraja would in addition become a proving ground for his uprising.... or a burial ground.

"We head to Toraja, then," he said to the rest. "The riders must go back and tell whatever Parthans wish to hear that they are invited to join us there! Tell them to head there!"

"I'll see to the message myself, Master Uldyssian!" replied Romus with increasing resolve. Three other men let out shouts of equal enthusiasm.

"The task is yours, then, you four. The rest of you remember! First light!"

They cheered again, caught up in the imagined spectacle of sweeping across the world and gathering with them throngs of enthusiastic newcomers. Uldyssian let them celebrate, knowing that it might very well be otherwise.

They might very well be slaughtered before they even reached the gates of Toraja.

"They would follow you anywhere," Mendeln commented.

"Even to the Burning Hells and High Heavens?" his brother returned, recalling the mythic places of which Lilith had spoken. He could scarcely imagine an eternal conflict between celestial beings, but even less could imagine he and his kind remaining potential fodder for whichever side triumphed.

Mendeln nodded. "Even there...if it should prove necessary."

He glanced in startlement, not certain whether Mendeln was jesting or not. Certainly, his brother did not seem the type to jest, not anymore.

They continued to let the Parthans cheer. If not the Burning Hells and High Heavens, at the very least there would be demons and more aplenty here in Sanctuary...chief among them Lilith. Lucion had been correct about one thing; Uldyssian had no doubt that she would find a way to come back into his life...and then attempt to either control or take it.

Whichever she desired, Uldyssian did not shy from facing her. She would find him far more than she thought. Much favored her in their struggle, but he was prepared.

"My birthright," he whispered. Then, thinking of all those there, Uldyssian corrected himself. "*Our* birthright. Our world." His determination grew greater yet as he thought once more of Achilios and those others who had perished for no good reason. "*Our destiny.*"

“Yes,” answered Mendeln, hearing Uldyssian despite how quiet he had spoken. “That and more. That and *much* more.”

And thinking about it, Uldyssian knew that he was right.

An uneasiness had spread through the main temple of the Triune. Few understood it, but all felt it. The high priests pretended as if all was as it normally was, but those who watched them close saw that even *their* eyes held some hint of concern.

In the private sanctum of the Primus, the demon Astrogha hung deep in an upper corner, his form completely shadowed from any who might enter. Around him scurried several eight-legged fiends, all moving with an anxiety he did not outwardly reveal.

But mixed with that anxiety was a growing thought. Lucion had not returned from wherever he had gone. It was far past any reasonable hour of return. While the son of Mephisto had said one thing concerning where he had vanished to, Astrogha had not taken that at face value. He knew that Lucion saw in this human something more than mere potential for the ranks of the morlu or any other force benefiting the Triune. Lucion had been on the verge of the unthinkable...perhaps wondering if the nephalem could raise him up above even his father and the other Prime Evils.

Yet, Lucion was not back and Astrogha now contemplated how that worked in his favor. Perhaps *he* should take on the aspect of the Primus. *He* should command the power of the Triune.

Yes, after all, it could certainly not be turned over to a fool such as Gulag. Gulag was pure chaotic force; he had no wit for commanding.

Suddenly, the demon sensed another presence in the chamber. He tensed, ready to spring if it turned out to be an intruder. Astrogha had eaten recently, but he always had a taste for blood.

But to his surprise, it was the one being he had not expected.

“Lucion is back,” he announced. “And has Lucion done what he wished?”

“In some ways, yes, in some ways, no,” the Primus remarked cryptically. “Astrogha?”

Lucion’s tone almost sounded as if he was not certain who spoke, but that could not be right. The spider demon chose to move on with the conversation. “Was there sign of her? Of Lilith?”

The Primus was quiet for a moment, then nodded. “Some, but I do not think we shall see much of her for a while.”

“Good, good...”

Lucion put a hand on the tall throne upon which he generally sat during audiences. As Astrogha watched, the towering figure settled

into it, then looked up into the shadows where the other demon lurked.

“I would be alone, Astrogha.”

“How long?” There were times when the son of Mephisto demanded this. Generally, the arachnid would retreat to one of the towers until Lucion was done with whatever it was he was working on. As the demon chosen to lead, Lucion had benefits that Astrogha often envied.

“From this point on,” returned Lucion, expression hardening. “Find yourself a place to spin a new web. The towers, perhaps. If I ever need you, I will summon you.”

He was being cast out of the chamber forever? Astrogha almost protested, then considered that Lucion was, after all, the *son* of Mephisto, whereas he was only a favored of the Lord of Terror. Diablo would not defend him against Lucion.

“As is wished,” the shadowy arachnid muttered. “As is wished.”

He summoned his children to him, then breathed upon the web so as to dissolve it. Then, with one last—and somewhat angry look—Astrogha vanished.

The figure on the throne reached out with sorcery to survey the room. No one was present, not even one of the spider’s over-inquisitive pets. The chamber was magically sealed off from all others.

The Primus let out a slight laugh...one with what might have been called a *feminine* aspect to it.

“Come to me, my love,” Lucion said with the voice of his sister. “I am waiting anxiously for you...”

And in the Cathedral of Light, the Prophet nodded.

All was going exactly as he had dictated.

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*For all the loyal and very patient fans
of the world of Sanctuary.*

Prologue

...The world was forever changed by the second coming of the nephalem, but changed most of all was the first among their kind, Uldyssian ul-Diomed. Wanting nothing more than the simple, worthy life of a farmer, he was now forced to become a catalyst for upheaval. Through him would be revealed some of the truth concerning Sanctuary, as the world was called by those who most vied to control it. Through him did others learn of the eternal war between the angels and demons through the guises of the Cathedral of Light and the Temple of the Triune.

And knowing Uldyssian as a threat to all they planned, both the Cathedral and the Temple in their own ways worked to either beguile him into becoming their puppet or destroy him utterly. Worse, betrayed by what he had thought love, Uldyssian became a danger to himself, for he risked becoming blind to what was happening around him even as he sought to free humans from the yoke of those believing themselves the race's rightful masters.

But although Uldyssian felt that the entire fate of Sanctuary rested on his weary shoulders, he could not know that there had been others fighting for centuries against his same enemies, fighting them despite what had seemed for centuries the hopelessness of their cause.

He could not know this, which was probably for the best...for they, in turn, were not certain if he should be welcomed...or destroyed, just as the angels and demons believed.

From the Books of Kalan
Fifth Tome, First Leaf

One

The city of Toraja burned...

While never able to approach in magnitude or glory great Kehjan to the east, Toraja had still been known far and wide for its unique sights catering to the pilgrim and the inhabitant alike. There was the vast, open market just beyond its northwestern gate, where anything from the known lands could be bought or sold for the right price. Near the city center lay the centuries-old, intricately sculpted gardens, where one could admire the spiral trees or the Falo Blooms, the fabled flowers with more than a dozen variations of bright color on each petal and a scent that perfumers could never match. Beyond that stood the towering Arena of Klytos, home of the Nirolian Games, attracting visitors from even the sprawling capital.

But all those legendary sites, often filled to capacity, were empty this one terrible eve. Indeed, there was only activity in a lone part of the city and the hint of that could be witnessed from as far as a mile away in the deep jungle surrounding walled Toraja.

Toraja burned...and at the center of the conflagration lay the Temple of the Triune.

The flames illuminated the sky well above the three-towered, triangular structure, the largest temple of the sect other than the main one near Kehjan. Black smoke billowed from the foremost tower, the one dedicated to Mefis, one of the three guiding spirits. The huge red circle representing both the order and *love*—Mefis's supposed sphere of influence—hung lopsided. Cast of iron, the immense circle now threatened those below as the damage from the fire ate away at its remaining supports. The original constructors had never imagined that such a fate would ever befall the structure and so had not added additional support.

If calamity imminently threatened the tower of Mefis, it had already claimed that of Dialon, to the right. The proud ram's head—symbol of determination—still hung high, but above it the structure was a collapsed ruin. Oddly, little of the upper level had actually fallen to the streets below; most of the stone and wood rubble lay piled atop, as if the tower had somehow imploded.

Hundreds of figures swarmed the area around the steps, those nearest the entrance clad in the azure, gold, or black robes of the three orders. With them stood scores of hooded, breast-plated figures

—the temple's Peace Warders—armed with swords and lances. The faithful of the Triune fought against a crush of bodies whose foremost ranks were dressed in simple peasant and farmer clothing of the upper lands far to the northwest of the great jungles. The pale skin and tighter garments of these first figures was in sharp contrast not only to the mainly swarthy servants of the temple, but also those making up most of the successive waves behind the lead attackers. Indeed, the bulk of the movement against the Triune consisted of natives of Toraja itself, marked by their loose-fitting, flowing, red and purple garments and long, black hair bound to the back.

Although it was the attackers who wielded the majority of the torches, the flames consuming much of the nearby sections of the city were not, for the most part, their doing. In fact, no one could for certain say how the first fires had begun, only that they seemed to initially work in favor of the priesthood...and that had been enough to turn what sympathies there had been for the Triune into anger.

That anger was all the impetus needed to urge Uldyssian to take down the temple without further delay. When he had initially arrived in Toraja—and once he had gotten over his astonishment at so many people packed into one place—Uldyssian had thought to gradually influence the citizenry into simply ousting the priests and their underlings from the city. But for such a heinous act—in which dozens of locals and even some of his original followers had perished—no remorse or sympathy remained in the former farmer's heart.

I came to this city hoping to teach, to convert people, Uldyssian bitterly thought as he strode toward the steps. *But they forced this upon all of us instead.*

Without seeing him, the crowd parted. Any of those touched by the power within Uldyssian—the power of the nephalem—could sense his nearness. The momentum of the crowd paused as they realized that Uldyssian had something in mind.

He had not been the cause of the devastation so far embracing the temple. That had been the results of the more primitive efforts by some of his enthusiastic followers, such as Romus, one of the lead Parthans. Romus was one of a handful of the most advanced among Uldyssian's acolytes. Partha had been the second place to witness the miracle of Uldyssian's gift, after his own village of Seram. However, unlike Seram, where the son of Diomedes had been cast as a murderer and monster, the Parthans had welcomed his abilities and embraced his simple but honest beliefs.

Uldyssian was not the image of a crusading prophet as fables usually went. He was no angelic, ageless youth like he who led the Cathedral of Light—the rival sect to the temple—nor a silver-haired, benevolent elder such as the Primus, whose servants now awaited

Uldyssian's wrath. Uldyssian ul-Diomed had been born to be a tiller of soil. Square jawed and with rough-hewn features half-draped by a short beard, he was strong of build due to his hard life but otherwise unremarkable. His sandy-colored hair hung unkempt down to his neck, any attempt at neatness lost in tonight's chaos. Uldyssian wore a plain brown shirt and pants and weathered boots. He carried no weapon save a knife thrust into his belt. Indeed, he needed no weapon, he himself far deadlier than the sharpest blade or the swiftest, truest arrow.

Or even a squad of Peace Warders, who at this very moment charged down the steps at him. Behind them, a priest of Dialon imperiously barked orders. Uldyssian had no special hate for the fool, for he knew that the cleric simply mouthed the words of his superior, secreted somewhere deep in the temple complex. Nonetheless, both the warriors and the priest would suffer for their zealous loyalty to the foul sect.

Uldyssian let the guards come nearly within weapon's reach, then, without so much as a blink, sent the entire contingent flying in different directions. Some collided with the pillars at the top of the steps, their bones audibly cracking, while others flew all the way back to the bronze doors themselves, where they dropped in twisted heaps. A few went hurtling to the sides, landing with a harsh crash at the feet of the waiting throng, who broke out into cheers at this display of their leader's power.

An archer next to the priest fired. He could not have made a worse decision. Uldyssian frowned, the only outward hint of the terrible memories flashing through his mind. He relived again his friend Achilios's stand before the demon Lucion, who, in the guise of the Primus, had created the Triune to corrupt and control Mankind. Still as vivid as the moment it had happened was the hunter's shot, which, at the demon's desire, turned about and *pierced* Achilios through the throat.

Uldyssian now did the same for the bolt fired at him. Without hesitation, it arced around, racing back up. The archer looked aghast...but he was not the target.

The arrow drove through the chest of the priest as if passing only through air. It continued on, still accelerating, until it reached the door bearing the circular symbol of Mefis. There, driven by Uldyssian's will, the arrow impaled itself in the center of the circle in a perfect bull's-eye, burying deep in the metal.

It all happened so swiftly that only now did the priest's body waver. He let out a gurgling sound and blood poured not only from the wound, but mouth as well. His expression went slack...and then the robed figure toppled forward, rolling down the steps in a macabre

tangle of loose limbs.

The archer dropped his weapon and fell on his knees in abject shock. He stared at Uldyssian, awaiting his doom.

A deathly calm pervaded the vicinity. Uldyssian strode up to the guard. Beyond the one stricken warrior, the rest of the temple's defenders grimly sought to regroup. The blood of several of Uldyssian's more impetuous converts decorated the area, giving proof to the Peace Warders' determination to let none pass alive.

Jaw set, Uldyssian placed a hand on the shoulder of the kneeling guard. In a voice that boomed as if thunder, the son of Diomedes said, "Let this one be spared...as an example." He glared at the other Peace Warders. "The rest can join their Primus in Hell."

His words provoked some slight confusion on the part of the armed guards, who could not know that Uldyssian had slain Lucion. This was not the first time that Uldyssian had noticed such reactions and he could only assume that word had not yet reached the outer temples of the Primus's unexplained absence. The senior priesthood had evidently smothered all hint of the calamity from their own flock, but Uldyssian would make certain that soon the truth would be known to the entire world.

Not that it would matter to those in Toraja. After this night, the Triune would be but a cursed word to many of the locals...as, very likely, would be his own name.

He eyed the guards and the priests. "You've spilled enough of other people's blood. Now pay with as much of your own."

One of the Peace Warders suddenly gasped. A seam opened on his throat...and out of it poured blood. He tried to cover it with a hand, but that hand, too, bled profusely. Other tears spread over his body, as if invisible swords slashed him from every direction. From each gushed more blood.

The men beside him started to retreat, but first one, then another and then another suffered similar—but not identical—rips and slashes over their bodies. Blood even seeped from beneath breastplates and under helmets and hoods.

The first man finally fell, a crimson pool as large as his head already staining the once pristine marble beneath him. His collapse was quickly followed by that of another...and then temple guards and priests fell in numbers. They suffered a hundredfold the terrible wounds that they had inflicted upon not only Uldyssian's people but years of secret victims before them. Not one was spared among the band upon whom Uldyssian had set his baleful gaze.

And from positions elsewhere among the defenders, dark-hearted Peace Warders suddenly lost all nerve. They began to abandon the

ranks and the priests did nothing to stop them, for they, too, were shaken by the unworldly might of the lone, insignificant-looking figure.

The crowd roared anew at what was surely a sign of absolute victory and surged forward again. The remaining Peace Warders were swamped, and as Uldyssian had declared, they received no mercy. Uldyssian continued on past the terrible struggle, more concerned with what lay within the walls. Peace Warders and minor priests meant nothing; the true threat awaited him deep in the sanctum of the master cleric, who answered directly to the Primus and, thus, knew the foul truth concerning the Triune's origins and goal.

The three doors confronted Uldyssian now, the ram of Dialon, the circle of Mefis, and the leaf of Bala all at eye level. The arrow he had sent flying through the priest still quivered in the middle door, the one he now chose through which to enter despite detecting that it had been barred from the inside.

A wrenching groan erupted from the door. The entire piece shook as if about to explode. Instead, though, it finally *flung* back, swinging so hard that two of the hinges tore out of the stone and the door ended up dangling lopsided.

Behind him, Uldyssian could sense several of his followers all but at his heels. He could no more stop them at this point than could have the Peace Warders. They were too caught up in the desire for retribution.

That suddenly bothered him. Uldyssian understood the reasons for their anger. When he, his brother Mendeln, their friend, Serenthia, and the Parthans had entered Toraja little more than two weeks before, it had been as weary travelers awed by the spectacle around them. Uldyssian had come with the intention of *peacefully* revealing the gift to all those willing to partake of it, but from the very beginning, the Triune had reacted as if a nest of vipers had suddenly hatched in their midst.

Two days after the crowds began to gather around him in the marketplace—most simply to hear his tale—the Torajian Guard had come to forcibly usher his followers out of the city and drag the former farmer himself to some undisclosed place of arrest. There had been no explanation given, but it had rapidly become clear that the orders had come directly from the temple.

Until that moment, Uldyssian had begun to believe that Toraja might turn out to be like Partha. Then again, perhaps the two were more similar than he had first thought, for had not the Triune struck at him there, as well? Under the command of the high priest of Mefis—sadistic Malic—friends had been brutally slaughtered and Uldyssian himself had nearly been marched off a helpless prisoner.

A scream broke out from behind him, cutting to an abrupt end his reverie. Uldyssian whirled.

Two people lay sprawled dead on the tiled floor and three others were badly wounded. Small metal stars stuck out from their throats, chests, and other parts of their bodies. The corpses were Parthans, and the loss of more of those who on their own had trailed a then reluctant Uldyssian into the deep jungles especially shook him.

With an angry gesture, he sent a wave of air throughout the chamber. His action came just in time, freezing a new mass of metal stars—their flight apparently triggered by some mechanism in the walls—in midair. Uldyssian let most of the deadly missiles clatter harmlessly to the floor, but sent a few back into the slots from which they had come in order to prevent others from launching. That done, he raced to the stricken figures.

The dying were all Torajians and one of them was very familiar to Uldyssian. Jezran Rhasheen had been the first local to approach the pale stranger speaking in the square, the dark-skinned youth the only son of a nearby prominent merchant. There had been no real reason for him to so willingly listen—much less accept—Uldyssian's words, for Jezran had obviously wanted for nothing in his life. Yet he had listened and listened well. When Uldyssian had offered to share his gift with any Torajian willing, it had been Jezran who had immediately stepped forward.

The dying boy looked up at the looming figure. As with all Torajians, to Uldyssian the whites of Jezran's eyes seemed much brighter and more vivid. He knew that the illusion was due to the latter's dark skin, but still found the sight arresting.

Jezran managed a sickly smile. He opened his mouth...then died. Uldyssian swore, knowing that the wounded youth had already been beyond even his skills.

But the others might *not* be. Realizing this, Uldyssian gently set Jezran's head down, then spun to the next victim, immediately placing his palm against the Torajian's forehead.

The man let out a gasp. With an unsettling sound, the vicious stars popped out of the wounds...which then *sealed*. The Torajian grinned gratefully.

Uldyssian did the same for the third victim, a woman, then glanced bitterly at Jezran's corpse. *Two alive, but one dead. So much for my vaunted gift...*

"He holds no anger against you," said Mendeln from behind Uldyssian, his sibling's voice utterly calm even in the midst of calamity, "and now better understands the truth concerning everything than either of us."

Mendeln was slighter of stature than his elder brother and had always been more studious. Although he had accepted from Uldyssian the same touch as the rest of the converts, in Mendeln, something different appeared to have happened. Uldyssian could sense none of the same force flowing through his sole remaining sibling as through him; instead, there was a shadow growing within Mendeln, yet one that Uldyssian could not say originated from anything evil.

However, neither could he say that it had been spawned by anything good.

Staring into his brother's penetrating black eyes, Uldyssian snarled, "I only understand that he and so many others are dead...but whether it's more my fault or the Triune's, I doubt I'll ever decide."

"That was not to what I was referring—" But Mendeln got no further. Uldyssian shoved past the black-robed figure and resumed his trek into the temple. The others followed at his heels, ever leaving around Uldyssian's brother a gap akin to that which they made for their leader. However, in Mendeln's case, of late it was as much out of an unwillingness to be near the fallow figure as it was respect for his place. Even the untouched could detect the oddness of the younger son of Diomedes.

"I've shown you the gift," Uldyssian declared to those behind him, while at the same time mentally seeking out hidden dangers ahead. "Remember to *use* it. It's your life. It's you."

At that moment, he sensed *them* coming. A chill ran down his spine and he prayed that his people had listened...or else many more were about to perish terribly.

He turned to face the path ahead again. The vast chamber in which they stood was the central gathering place for the faithful before the sermons of the three orders began. Towering statues of the Triune's guiding spirits stood watch over the separate entryways leading to where each of the orders met. They were robed, ethereal beings with only vague countenances. Bala on the left, with its hammer and the bag containing the seeds of all life. Dialon on the right, bearing at its breast the Tablets of Order.

Mefis in the middle...always Mefis...carrying nothing but cupping its hands as if about to gently receive an innocent baby.

A baby to be slaughtered, Uldyssian always imagined.

And with such an image burning in his mind, he thrust out a warning hand to the rest just as all three doors opened and the grotesque, bestial figures in ebony armor came rushing forth. They screamed their bloodlust as they waved their weapons high, and although there were far fewer of them than the invaders, they were no less daunting, especially to Uldyssian, who knew of them best. There

was that about them that did not speak of mortal flesh anymore, but rather something long overdue for the grave. Uldyssian sensed the sudden dismay among his followers and knew that he had to show them that, while sinister, the morlu were not indestructible.

But before he could strike, a brilliant, blinding light flared before his eyes. Letting out a cry, Uldyssian staggered into one of those just behind him. Once more, in his concern for the others, he had overestimated himself. He should have expected the priests to have something cunning yet planned in conjunction with this new attack.

A pair of hands dragged Uldyssian out of the way just as a heavy form collided with his right side. Uldyssian spun around, then tumbled to the floor.

As he fought to clear his vision, horrific cries rose all around. The terrifying sound of crunching bone sent renewed chills through him. He heard a deep-throated laugh and recognized the demonic voice of a morlu savoring the carnage he caused.

Uldyssian had not expected to find any of the Triune's ghoulish servants in Toraja. He had assumed that their kind was for the most part relegated to the vast temple near the capital and that those who had followed Malic had been exceptions sent out due to the Primus's interest in the son of Diomedes. Now Uldyssian wondered if each of the temples had its own contingent, which boded ill. That meant far more morlu than he could have ever imagined existing...

His eyes began to focus. It infuriated Uldyssian that for some reason he could not speed up the process. Too slowly, shapes began to coalesce.

And one of those shapes—filling his gaze—was a morlu reaching for him.

For his bulk, the armored figure moved astonishingly swift. He seized Uldyssian by the collar and dragged his prey up to eye level.

Black pits were all that existed physically of the morlu's eyes, yet Uldyssian knew that they saw him better than any mortal orbs. He had witnessed enough during the bitter struggle in Master Ethon's home to understand just how malevolent and powerful were the forces that animated the ebony-helmed fighters.

"You...are the one..." his assailant grunted in that voice that could not quite pass for that of anything living. "The *one*..."

Steeling himself, Uldyssian concentrated—but again a brilliant light flared before his eyes. Once more, he was completely blinded.

The morlu laughed harder—and then let out a peculiar grunt. He released his hold on the unseeing Uldyssian, who just managed to keep from falling and cracking his skull on the floor.

Shaking his head, Uldyssian focused his every effort on seeing. The

world came into focus once more...and there he beheld Serenthia, a spear gripped tight in her hands, skewering the morlu as if he wore no armor nor weighed an ounce. The spear blazed silver and Serenthia's black hair fluttered as if alive. Her blue eyes, always radiant, now burned with utter determination. Her normally ivory skin was flushed and her red lips were twisted in grim satisfaction. Uldyssian did not doubt that she imagined Achilios's death as she drove the spear deeper into the twitching, armored figure. She had only just before Achilios's murder come to love the hunter after years of seeking Uldyssian's favor, knowledge that still filled him with shame.

One of the very first to accept Uldyssian's gift, Serenthia was now also among those most proficient in drawing it forth. Again, Uldyssian knew that much of that ability had to do with her loss, but even he was astonished by her amazing effort now.

The morlu clawed desperately at her, the hungry grin now replaced by something approaching fear. The spear allowed Serenthia to hold him at bay.

She looked anything but the daughter of a country merchant now. Her simple cloth blouse and skirt had given way to the wrapped, colorful dress of a Torajian woman. Indeed, with her long, sleek raven hair, she looked as if she carried some of their blood in her. The dress was designed to flow loose at the legs, and instead of boots, Serenthia also wore the strapped sandals more common to the people here.

The morlu shook violently, his massive form abruptly beginning to shrivel. Within the space of a breath, he looked even more late for the grave, only his wrinkled white skin now enshrouding his bones. Yet, still Serenthia kept him impaled. Her expression took on an unsettling eagerness...

"Serry!" Uldyssian called, using the childhood version of her name that he had only recently ceased favoring. He feared where her outrage was taking her.

His voice cut through the din...and through her fury. Serenthia glanced back at him, then, with a shiver, the morlu again. A tear slipped unbidden from her, one that had Achilios written on it.

She tugged on the spear, which slid easily out of her foe. The armored villain dropped like a puppet suddenly bereft of strings. Bones and armor scattered across the marble tile.

Serenthia looked at Uldyssian with relief and gratitude. He said nothing more to her, only nodding his understanding as he rose to see to the others.

As he feared, the trap had claimed more lives. There were bodies strewn about and although many were morlu, so, too, were there Torajians and Parthans. Uldyssian saw the slack face of a Parthan

woman who had been there on the day when—near the town square where first he had preached—he had healed a young boy with a malformed arm. That brought bitter memories of the lad and his mother, Bartha, for they had both perished when the townsfolk had come to his defense against Lucion. The boy had been one of the demon's several random victims and Bartha—stalwart Bartha—had died of a broken heart soon after.

So much blood...he thought. So much of it due to me...and their belief in what I bring to them...

But then silence swept over the chamber and Uldyssian realized that the fighting was again, for the moment, over. The morlu had not laid waste to the intruders; it was the beasts of Lucion who had been utterly decimated. They had taken lives—too many lives—but not so much as their own numbers.

That in itself was a miracle, but far more important, the others had taken up both his and Serenthia's example. It had not been weapons alone that had brought the morlu to bay, but the same gift that Uldyssian wielded, albeit on a less focused scale. One warrior had been neatly severed in two, the cut so clean at the waist that it looked as if all the morlu needed was for someone to put him back together to reanimate him. Another lay far above, his corpse dangling limply over Mefis's outstretched hands. Scores more lay scattered about in all sorts of macabre conditions, a striking image that, despite their own losses, Uldyssian hoped would bring heart to his surviving companions.

Surveying the dead again, Uldyssian suddenly choked. The triangular tiles covering the floor were now splattered in black bile... or whatever it was that passed for morlu blood. But mixed with it was the precious life fluids of those who had either acted too slowly or had hesitated in their trust of their gift. Uldyssian mourned each and cursed once more the fact that all his vaunted might could not resurrect them.

And that, for reasons he did not understand, made him look again for Mendeln.

He found his brother hovering over not their dead comrades, but rather two morlu who had somehow become twisted around one another. Uldyssian's brow arched at this enterprising action and wondered just who among his followers had managed it.

Mendeln looked up from whatever it was he was doing. His generally unperturbed expression now took on a darker cast.

"This is not over," he announced needlessly. However, it was his next words that most set the elder son of Diomedes on edge. "Uldyssian...there are *demons* here."

No sooner had he said it than Uldyssian also sensed their nearby presence. The foulness of the morlu...themselves of demonic make, although of mortal flesh...had masked from him the dire fact.

Uldyssian also sensed just where they were...and that they awaited him.

He had faced other demons besides Lucion, none of them proving as much a threat as the Primus himself. Yet, that these new ones waited so patiently—something hard for all but the most cunning of them to do—further stirred his suspicions. They *knew* of him, knew what he had become...

He had only one choice. “Mendeln—Serenthia—keep watch on the others! No one is to follow me.”

His brother nodded, but the woman frowned. “We won’t let you go alone—”

Uldyssian stopped her with a glance. “I don’t want another Achilios—*no one* follows, especially you two.”

“Uldyssian—”

Mendeln took her arm. “Do not argue with him, Serenthia. This must be.”

He said it in such a manner that even his brother paused to look at him. Mendeln offered nothing more, though, as had become typical of him of late.

However enigmatic the statement, Uldyssian had already learned to heed such comments. “No one follows,” he repeated, staring down *everyone*. “Or it won’t be the wrath of demons you face.”

Hoping that they would listen but still fearing that some—especially Serenthia—might yet disobey, Uldyssian crossed the threshold of the door through which Dialon’s followers would have gone. The moment he was clear, the door slammed behind him, just as he knew that so too did the other pair.

He had sealed the way, at least temporarily. Even Mendeln and Serenthia would find it difficult to overcome his effort. So long as he could, Uldyssian would keep the path to the underground chambers—the area where worship of the Triune’s *true* masters took place—barred from anyone else. Too many had perished for him already.

He sensed the demons nearer, although their exact locations were not known. In truth, they were only a part of the reason that Uldyssian wanted only himself at risk.

Perhaps that had been what Mendeln had meant, Uldyssian suddenly realized. Perhaps with his own strange abilities his brother had also detected the more subtle yet distinctive *third* presence awaiting Uldyssian...a presence that was much, much more powerful than a mere senior priest and known so very well to both of them.

A presence that could only be *Lilith*.

Two

All around Mendeln, the voices whispered. The awful truth concerning this place was best known to him, who could hear the victims' own words.

So many, he thought. *So many wrongly done in. The Balance is much askew because of this place alone.*

Uldyssian's brother did not understand exactly just what "the Balance" was, but knew that the horrible events that had taken place in the inner recesses of the temple over the past years had certainly befouled "it." That disturbed him even more than all the deaths this night, although their cumulative effect was no good thing, either.

And then there was also Lilith...or Lylia, as he, Serenthia, and most painfully of all, Uldyssian, had known her.

Serenthia stalked back and forth like an impatient cat, her eyes ever on the doors so effectively "locked" by his brother. The rest of Uldyssian's followers eagerly spread through the chambers, tearing apart the grand trappings as they went along despite the fact that the fires consuming other portions of the building would eventually do the same here. Mendeln, aware that victory was truly not theirs yet, paid great heed to the voices, even those of the dead priests and Peace Warders. Not the morlu, of course, for they were creatures long dead and so from them there was only emptiness. He listened very carefully, focusing on some that seemed more relevant than others.

How simple we were, Mendeln thought almost wistfully. *Farmers and brothers in a small village, destined to live out our lives tilling the soil and raising livestock.* It was Lilith's fault that it had come to all this, Lilith, who had chosen Uldyssian to be her pawn in some otherworldly struggle between demons and angels over a pitiful little rock called by them *Sanctuary*.

Mendeln's world.

He did not consider either himself or his brother to be champions of Mankind, but Uldyssian especially had been cast into a role he could now never discard. The fate of *everything* apparently depended upon what he chose to do. Mendeln could only try to be there to lend whatever questionable support that he could.

His musings were interrupted by a deep sense of foreboding. The voices cut off, save for one that did not belong with them. It was stronger, *alive*, and one that had comforted Mendeln as much as it had

guided him through his own mysterious transformation.

Beware the hands of the Three...it said. They grasp for everything, then crush it in their all-consuming grip...

Mendeln's brow wrinkled at this esoteric comment. Of what useful knowledge was such—

“Serenthia!” he shouted with more animation than any had heard from him in days. “All of you! Stay back from the statues—”

But his warning came too late for some. As if of living flesh, the gargantuan effigies bent forward. Bala's heavy hammer came down on two Torajians, crushing them beneath it. Dialon battered away a hapless Parthan with the edge of one of the tablets.

Mefis...Mefis seized a woman and squeezed hard. Even Mendeln found himself nauseated by the monstrous results.

With a scraping of stone that echoed through the huge chamber like the combined moans of the dead, the statues descended among the invaders. The once confident band now retreated back to the doors through which they had come, but those doors, too, were also now shut...and not because of Uldyssian.

“Lilith...” he gasped just as massive Dialon turned a stony gaze his way. The colossus raised his hammer. “Very much *Lilith...*”

Through the empty worship hall he strode, eyes and other senses ever on alert. Androgynous effigies of Dialon stared down at Uldyssian, who thought that the supposedly benevolent images looked more mocking than anything else.

What great demon are you, Dialon? he grimly wondered. *What's your true name?*

In the outer chambers, torches in niches in the walls had well illuminated everything. In here, though, only a few round oil lamps dangling from the arched ceiling gave any light and that not much. Moreover, the path ahead looked even darker, finally fading into utter blackness perhaps ten yards or so ahead.

Yet still Uldyssian moved on. He passed by and under the huge statues, entering the passage that he knew would lead him to her.

Just as she desired.

The beautiful, aristocratic vision that had first graced his wondering eyes what seemed so long ago still remained strong with him even after the discovery of the dread truth and the subsequent betrayal. The thick, long blond tresses, often artfully bound atop the head as befitting a noble-woman, the glittering emerald eyes, the slim perfect lips—they would never leave his imagination.

But with them also remained the nightmarish recollection of an

inhuman seductress, a creature with scaled flesh, vicious quills for hair, and a tail like the reptile she resembled.

"Lydia..." he muttered, the name both a curse and a yearning. *"Damn you, Lilith..."*

Something scurried over his foot. Startled more because he had not sensed it rather than from the thing itself, Uldyssian squinted. It was only a spider, albeit a fair-sized one. It was hardly surprising to find such a creature in this place. Uldyssian immediately forgot it, his concerns with vermin much larger and more deadly.

The last of the failing oil lamps gave way. Darkness prevailed. All this was a show for him, he realized. He had come hunting what he considered evil and so they were granting him the appropriate mood. This was in some ways a game to them and that knowledge further infuriated the human. They cared nothing for all the lives lost, not even of those who had willingly served them.

Something got into his face. He swatted at it, then felt a tiny creature crawling on the back of his hand. Uldyssian brushed it off, aware that it was a second spider.

Deciding this was a move in the game he could do without, Uldyssian summoned light.

The first time he had managed this feat, it had been due, Uldyssian later understood, to Lilith's presence. Now, it was as familiar to him as breathing. But the pale white glow he called into being now was not nearly as powerful as it should have been. The sphere barely revealed the stone corridor more than two yards ahead. He could *sense* much farther than that, but natural instinct made him want to see it, too.

While it was possible for him to increase the sphere's intensity by concentrating more on it, Uldyssian would then be able to focus less on his surroundings. This was not like the battle with Lucion, where as much of what Uldyssian had achieved had been due to outrage as it had natural ability. He needed to move with utter caution, for Lucion's cunning was nothing compared with that of his devilish sister.

The corridor stretched farther than it should have, at least according to his senses. Whether illusion or not, Uldyssian would find out soon enough. Lilith would not let him wait much longer.

He let out a sharp cry as what felt like a fork jabbed the skin at the back of his neck. His flailing hands knocked off a furred form with many legs.

The arachnid scurried out of the illumination. As he rubbed the burning patch of skin, Uldyssian noticed that the path behind him had also grown dark. The light from the chamber had been completely cut off.

The wound began to throb. Uldyssian berated himself for letting something so mundane as a spider get through defenses that morlu, and thus far, Lilith had not.

Or...*had* she?

Focusing his will on the wound, Uldyssian quickly expelled whatever the creature had left in him, then completely healed the location. He could thank the high priest Malic for the trick, having watched the villain eject Achilles's arrow from his back before attending to the wound itself.

But even as the son of Diomedes finished, over him flowed a swarm of multilegged creatures with sharp fangs and claws. Growing up on a farm, he was used to all sorts of insects and arachnids, but none such as these. They moved with vile purpose, attacking as quickly as they could in as many places as possible. They bit through garments and even through boots, while others crawled over them to find flesh of their own to attack.

At first, his reaction was simply human. He swore and tried to wipe them off as quickly as possible. The spiders made his attempts laughable by even clinging to the hands that sought to remove them. Within a heartbeat, Uldyssian was all but covered by the swarm.

Then, reason managed to return. Taking a deep breath—while avoiding swallowing any of the tinier vermin—Uldyssian concentrated on the floating sphere.

Now at last, the fiery ball flared bright...in fact, a thousand times greater than before. At the same time, heat enveloped Uldyssian and his unwanted pets.

However, where the heat only warmed the man, it *seared* the spiders.

They shriveled rapidly under the relentless scorching. Shrill cries—in some ways too close to human—assailed Uldyssian's ears. By the dozens, then hundreds, tiny, burnt corpses tumbled to the stone floor.

Sweating more from effort than heat, he finally reduced the globe's fury to a more tolerable level. Around him rose a stench more reminiscent of decay than burning. Uldyssian kicked at one pile of vermin, which scattered into ash.

But as his foot descended to the floor again, it found no purchase. Instead, it sank into the stone as if into water.

Uldyssian suddenly sensed the immediate presence of one of the demons, but that knowledge came too late. Something snagged his sinking leg, trying to completely draw him into the floor. A thick, slow, malevolent laugh echoed in the corridor.

Something formed just at the edge of the sphere's light. It looked to Uldyssian like a grotesque, inhuman head made from the stone itself.

A fissure opened, one that spread into a crude, bestial grin.

“Waant...” it said hungrily, then chuckled again.

Whatever held Uldyssian’s leg dragged him toward the ever-expanding maw. Two other, smaller fissures opened up behind the mouth, forming eyes of a sort.

“Huuuungrrrryyy...” the demon rumbled merrily. “Waaant...”

Recovering from his astonishment, Uldyssian gritted his teeth and leaned forward. The demon chuckled again, perhaps thinking that its prey wanted to end this quickly. Uldyssian did, of course...just not the way the creature desired.

He slammed a fist into the watery stone. The power of the nephalem enabled him to send a shock wave that coursed over his macabre attacker much the way the spiders had over him. Uldyssian had not had any idea if what he intended would work; he only knew that focusing his will and determination on a goal had saved him more than once.

The demon let out a roar of outrage and pain as the wave of pure force finished sweeping across him. The mouth twisted into a sinister frown and the eyes glared.

“Gulag kills!” it rumbled needlessly.

The walls rushed in on Uldyssian, who only now understood that *everything* around him had become part of the bestial demon.

He let out a pained groan as the stone crushed against him. Pinned and with his bones already feeling as if they were breaking, Uldyssian almost gave in to his destruction. However, once again *her* visage appeared in his mind, beautiful but also monstrous...and utterly mocking his failure.

Straining every muscle, he pushed against the crushing forces, pushed against them...and finally won. The walls receded enough for him to get his hands in position, at which point Uldyssian shoved them apart as hard as he could.

From Gulag, there was a sound that Uldyssian could only guess had to be of consternation. It was doubtful that anyone had ever escaped the beast’s grasp.

Seizing upon the change in fortune, the son of Diomedes reached down and took hold of the liquid stone in both hands. It should have slipped through his fingers, but the power of the nephalem again prevailed over that of Gulag. To Uldyssian, the demon felt like a slithering serpent minus the bones. It writhed in his grip, but could not slip free.

“Is Gulag still hungry?” he mocked.

Although clearly confused, the creature was either still confident of his might or simply too dull witted to realize that he faced no mere

human. Uldyssian hoped for the latter, but could not discount the former, which meant that the sooner this ended, the better.

With a titanic tug, he drew Gulag nearer. As the demon flowed toward Uldyssian, once more the man felt something clutch not only the one leg, but the other, too.

As this happened, Gulag let out another bestial roar. The walls and the rest of the nearby floor rose and poured toward Uldyssian in what was clearly a rush to smother the resisting prey. Uldyssian held his breath instinctively, then stared at the part of Gulag he held in his hands. It felt like skin or parchment...and that helped him decide what to do next.

As he had done before, Uldyssian pulled his hands as far apart as he could, only this time maintaining his grip on the sinister creature.

Like the parchment he had chosen to imagine it to be, the essence of the demon came apart with an awful ripping sound. Gulag let out a cry resembling the roar of a raging river. The walls and floor flailed about, finally causing Uldyssian to lose his grip and sending him falling.

But that was all that the demon could muster. Uldyssian's attack had done him in. The rip continued to spread, running quickly along Gulag's length and not even ceasing its momentum when it reached the deep maw and sinister orbs.

Gulag was literally torn in two. The halves quivered like pudding. A moan escaped both—

Then, with one last rumble...the demon melted.

His form lost all substance. Gulag completely liquified, puddling on the floor. A faint slime covered the walls and ceiling, but otherwise they were normal again.

The stone was once more solid beneath Uldyssian's feet, solid, if sticky. An odor akin to rotting garbage assailed him.

Something else caught his attention. Where once the corridor ahead had seemed endless, now another bronze door beckoned but a short distance away.

Stepping cautiously through the sticky sludge that had once been the demon, Uldyssian advanced on the door. He waited for the next threat to strike him, but nothing happened. The embossed image of a gentle Dialon stared back at Uldyssian from the door.

Uldyssian frowned. Another image, almost so indistinct as to be invisible, seemed to lay beneath that of the benevolent spirit. He squinted—

With a gasp, Uldyssian looked away. Although he had just stared directly at it, he could not remember any exact detail of the awful vision, only that it had horrified him as nothing else had. He thought

he recalled a glimpse of curled horns and of teeth as sharp as daggers...

Shaking his head, Uldyssian forced the disturbing memory away. He dared not concentrate on the fiendish vision. Somehow, as faint as it had been, it yet drew from deep within him some childhood sense of *terror*. Every nightmare that had ever haunted Uldyssian as a young boy had, at least for a moment, returned as fresh as ever.

Steeling himself anew, Uldyssian raised his hand toward the door. He knew better than to touch it. Even if Lilith had done nothing to it, surely the senior priests had cast some dire spell.

As if propelled by an angry ghost, the door flung open. Uldyssian stepped through.

The chamber was vast, possibly more so than even the great hall. Much of it was shadowed, the only illumination other than his sphere being torches set to best display a marble dais upon which stood a stone platform a little more than the length of a man and tilted slightly to the right.

And on that platform—that *altar*—lay a grisly sight that had once been a man when still it had owned its flesh and organs.

Uldyssian did not try to hold back his revulsion. Although it did not surprise him to find evidence of human sacrifice, the freshness of it shook him to the core. This very day, even as he and his followers had stormed the temple, a soul had been slaughtered in order to curry the favor of a demon.

Then, he noticed a slight movement in the far upper corner above the platform, movement by something that had been hidden from his immediate detection. From what little Uldyssian had seen of it, it was a creature reminiscent of a gigantic, furred spider...but also...also somehow a *man*. The second demon? Uldyssian recalled the swarm of spiders and suspected that this was the source. If so, it was a far more cautious and cunning beast than Gulag.

He started toward its location...then noticed the other figures moving toward him from the dark recesses in the back of the chamber. He had wondered when the senior priest would act. From what Uldyssian had gathered about the Triune's inner workings, in all the lesser temples the three orders were overseen by one cleric chosen from either Mefis, Dialon, or Bala. Below him were three lesser priests who ministered for each the separate faiths. Only in the main temple by Kehjan could be found the three high priests—*two* now, with Malic recently dead—who governed the entire sect in the name of the Primus.

A heavysset, bald figure in gray and bloodred robes gestured almost indifferently at Uldyssian. Immediately, a dozen acolytes whose own

garments represented all three orders raised their hands palm up and began chanting.

Uldyssian felt an incredible coldness surround him, but his mere desire for it to be gone quickly ended the problem. The priests faltered in their chanting, only their master seemingly unperturbed by their failure. He glanced with disdain at the nearest pair, who nervously took up the spellwork once more and were quickly joined by their brethren.

“Be silent,” an impatient Uldyssian murmured.

The chanting ceased, although the priests continued for a few second more to open and close their mouths, it gradually dawning on them that their voices had been stripped away.

A curious chuckle momentarily escaped the senior priest. He drew from his robes a small, azure stone. This was apparently a signal for his underlings to do the same.

The last time Uldyssian had faced someone wielding such stones, it had been Malic and he had revealed those gems to be some manner by which to summon demons to his will. During that struggle, Lilith had secretly taken a hand, eliminating immediately what possibly would have been the most deadly and adding her strength to what he had believed strictly his own when he had battled the rest. While Uldyssian trusted more in his own power now, he saw no reason to invite threat when it could be removed quickly enough.

He made a fist.

One of the lesser priests screamed as the gem he held flared to fiery life. To their credit, the rest reacted instantly, flinging the stones from their palms. As it was, three others still suffered burns to some degree, but nothing as terrible as the first. He fell to his knees, sobbing and clutching the blackened cinder that had been his hand.

The senior priest chortled, again an odd reaction. He had not been affected in the least, having tossed away his gem even before Uldyssian had finished the fist.

Frowning, Uldyssian stared at him...stared at what stood there beyond mortal vision.

And then he knew...

The elder priest seemed to recognize this in turn. “I think they are not needed any more,” the bald man announced. He looked to his lackeys. “You may die.”

They stared at him, entirely baffled. Uldyssian felt some sympathy for them...but not much. They had willingly taken the blood and souls of the living for their dark masters.

The priests collapsed as one. They did not scream, having no time to draw another breath. There was no mark on their bodies, save the

earlier burns.

For some reason, Uldyssian immediately surveyed the shadows where the spider demon had hidden. He knew instinctively that the shadows were now empty, their unsettling inhabitant having evidently fled elsewhere during the confrontation with the robed figures.

"Dear Astrogha is most obedient," the senior priest said in an oddly feminine voice. "When his Primus commands him to leave instantly, he does so without question."

"And does he realize that his Primus is no longer Lucion, but Lucion's sister?" Uldyssian stared into the other's eyes. "Does he, *Lilith*?"

She leered at him in a manner that would have likely been very seductive if not for the fact that her body was that of a sweating, corpulent man. "Fear makes many blind, as does love, my love..."

"There's no love between us, Lilith. Only lies and hate."

The priest pouted. "Oh, my dear Uldyssian, is it because of this poor dress I wear? That can be remedied. We are alone and the fool's served his purpose..."

Wild, green flames erupted around the bulky figure. Uldyssian raised an arm to shield his eyes from the intense brightness that accompanied the unnatural fire. As his gaze adjusted, he watched the priest's garments and hair quickly curl and turn to ash. The man's abundant flesh blackened and baked. Fiery gobbets dropped from him to the floor, revealing sinew, muscle, and bone.

The face burned away, in its place a mocking skull still briefly retaining the eyeballs. However, those shriveled into the sockets even as the horrific figure stepped toward the human.

"I want to look my best for you, after all," the burning skeleton cooed. By now, the flames had eaten away at everything but bone and even that was quickly vanishing. Yet, underneath the crumbling bone, Uldyssian caught flashes of emerald green cloth and ivory skin. The legs broke away, from them blossoming an elegant skirt beneath which glimpses of feminine feet became more and more obvious. The rib cage burst forward, in its place the bodice of what was a familiar, elegant gown that also revealed a very feminine form.

The back and the top of the dark skull broke as rich, golden hair flung out, then cascaded down. Last to vanish of the unfortunate priest was the burnt face. The jawbone dropped, then the rest.

Arms outstretched, she stood before him in all her glory. Despite what he had claimed, Uldyssian felt his heart wrench. Unbidden from his lips came the name by which he had best known this wondrous figure. "*Lylia*."

She smiled at him in what he recalled the exact same manner the

first time their eyes had met. “Dear, sweet Uldyssian!” The beautiful woman reached forth her slim, perfect hands. “Come, take me in your strong arms...”

His body flinched forward before the reality struck him. The son of Diomedes swore, which amused his companion.

“How colorful a turn of phrase! That’s a side you should nurture, dear Uldyssian! It adds character!”

He clenched his fists so tight the knuckles whitened. “No more taunts, Lilith! No more charades! That face isn’t yours, any more than it is the priest’s or the Primus’s! You stand before me, then do so as yourself, demon!”

She giggled. “Whatever your tastes, my love!”

Unlike her dramatic discarding of the priest’s body, the shift from “Lyliia” to the true Lilith was almost instantaneous. A crimson aura momentarily surrounded the aristocratic beauty—and in the next breath the demon herself stood there.

Enough of a facial resemblance existed that no one could doubt that the two females were one and the same, but that was the only link. Lilith stood taller, as tall as Uldyssian, in fact, and moved about on splayed hooves instead of feet. Her body was dark green and hideously scaled and the lush golden hair had been replaced by the quills. Those quills ran all the way down to the reptilian tail, an appendage climaxing in wicked barbs.

Her fingers—four, not five—ended in curved claws. The hands moved tantalizingly across her torso, reminding him that she still had the ample curves that had enticed the mortal so. If anything, they were more lush and, worse for Uldyssian, unclothed. Even hating her so much as he did, he could not help surveying her body. Such was her power.

One of the hands finally led his gaze up to her face. Yes, she still looked akin to Lyliia, but only in the structure. Lyliia had not had sharp teeth designed for shredding or burning red orbs lacking any pupil...

“I’ve missed your touch, my darling,” Lilith whispered, her forked tongue licking over her lips. “And I know that you have missed mine...”

Uldyssian knew that she was seeking to keep him off his guard and the unfortunate thing was that she was close to succeeding. He had not realized just how much actually confronting her would affect him. Lilith, on the other hand, had obviously known all too well.

Then, Uldyssian thought about all the deaths instigated by her mad ambitions and most of the desire faded. To the demon, the lives lost had been minor matters. She had cared nothing for Serenthia’s father, for Master Ethon and his son Cedric, or Bartha, or any of the scores of

Parthans and Torajians thus far slaughtered. Certainly Lilith had not had an iota of remorse even for the priests she had slaughtered, including the missionaries whose bloody demise had begun the chain of events.

Most of all, she had cared nothing for her brother, the true Primus. Clearly his destruction had merely been so that she could seize the power base that he had created in the Triune. However, that prize was one she would not long be able to savor, if he had his way.

“This temple’s fallen, Lilith,” Uldyssian declared. “What those with me haven’t torn down the flames your puppets set loose will consume. The same fate will befall the next and the next...until the great one itself near Kehjan is the last. Then...it’ll join the rest. You’ll serve as Primus for a very short time.”

“Will I, my dear Uldyssian?” Her tail slapped lightly on the floor, sending odd bits of the senior priest scattering. Lilith leaned forward, letting her ample bounty display itself unhindered. “But how splendid...as that is exactly what I want!”

Her pronouncement startled Uldyssian. Belatedly, he realized that his mouth hung open. Face flushing, he closed it, then tried to gather his thoughts. Yet again, Lilith had proven her mastery over him with but a few words.

“Yes,” the succubus said, smiling widely. Her inhuman eyes flashed with enjoyment at his consternation. “I want you to take down the Triune! I want you to put an end to the temple...”

“But—” Uldyssian finally managed. “That makes no sense whatsoever. Now that *you* control the Triune...”

“Ahh, but it makes perfect sense, my love! It makes perfect sense! It is a sign of my affection for you that I tell you all this, which even my unlamented brother’s servants do not know! Yes, my little *nephalem*... you *will* destroy the temple for me...and the Cathedral of Light, too...”

But if Lilith desired something of him, Uldyssian desperately thought, telling him would *surely* make the man want to do just the opposite...

She either read that thought—not impossible for her—or simply understood his mind better than he. “Oh, but my dear Uldyssian! You will not have any *choice* in the matter! You see, if you do not do your best to stir your nephalem powers to greater life—and also those latent in the fools that follow you—I will have the Triune utterly crush you! Do you think that this is all my poor brother gathered to him? There is so *much* more! My brother was very clever, his only mistake was in underestimating me—”

Suddenly, Lilith stood face-to-face with Uldyssian. How she had gotten so near without him aware of it, he could not say.

“—just as you, too, always have, poor darling!”

Before Uldyssian could stop her, the demon kissed him soundly. She had done the same in the past and so he should have been prepared for it. With as much irritation at himself as hatred toward her, Uldyssian grabbed for Lilith, but the demon slipped from his grasp.

“I won’t do as you plan, damn you!” he growled. “I’m through playing your puppet! I’ll not create an army of nephalem ready to do your bidding!”

That was what she truly wanted, he knew too well. She had been among those who had created Sanctuary, but for her murderous ways—including slaying most of her companions—she had been exiled by her lover...an angel, if Lilith could be believed about anything. Those murders had revolved around the children—the first nephalem—born through the unions of the renegade demons and angels. Uldyssian could grant her credit for wishing to save them, but now it seemed that all their descendants mattered to her was as fodder or soldiers to use in her mad campaign of vengeance.

“Will you not?” she teased. “Will you not, dear love?” The demoness pulled back. “Then, why have you not attacked me yet?”

Lilith had him again...but for the *last* time, Uldyssian swore. He stretched out a hand toward her—

The air around the demoness started to ripple...but Lilith was no longer there. Instead, Uldyssian felt her materialize behind him.

“Much improved, my darling Uldyssian...much improved.”

He did not turn to face her, instead merely concentrating on where she was.

But...again, he was too late.

Now Lilith’s voice echoed throughout the chamber, though she herself was nowhere to be seen. “However, you still need a little more practice, I think! After all, you must be your best when facing the power of the Triune...much less sweet, treacherous *Inarius*.”

Try as he might, Uldyssian could not sense Lilith anywhere and that told him just how insufficient all his might was. He had expected to be able to face her much better than this, but, as before, both emotionally and physically she had played him perfectly.

“Come and face me, Lilith!” Uldyssian shouted as he turned in a circle. He sought her in every dark corner, but there was *nothing*, absolutely nothing save her voice, projected from far, far away.

“All in good time, my love. A little more practice first. Why, you can start by perhaps still saving some of your *friends*! You have so few left already...”

Her voice faded away. Caught up in his anger, he did not at first pay heed to her last comments. Then...then Uldyssian felt the terrible

threat without, a threat he could only assume that Lilith's cunning skills had shielded from his "vaunted" perceptions.

Rather than keeping Mendeln, Serenthia, and the rest safe, he had left them right where the demoness had wanted them.

Three

In a place that was not a place, the black-shrouded figure stared beyond his empty surroundings into that realm called Sanctuary by the knowledgeable few. He noted the terrible strife overtaking the city of Taraja and had already begun calculating the possible repercussions.

“He is moving too quickly,” the shadowed man said to the emptiness. “Too irrationally...”

He moves as he must...as do we...

The voice would have stilled the heart of most, for it was as much presence as it was sound. Yet, the one to whom it spoke merely nodded, for he had known the speaker so long that even its uniqueness had become too familiar.

Failure had also become too familiar, and he did not want to face it again. Failure threatened the Balance and despite centuries of learning to focus his emotions inward—where they could be controlled—a deep frown slowly spread across his marblelike countenance.

“Then...we must become more active...”

As he spoke, above him there suddenly glittered what seemed to be stars. Yet these stars moved, gradually forming an immense, serpentine figure, a creature half-seen, half-imagined...and to most, completely myth.

A dragon...

More active than the initiating of his birth brother? the stars asked, the tone invoking irony.

“More...” the shrouded figure returned defiantly, “although Mendeln ul-Diomed is far exceeding my expectations. I would almost swear that he...”

Is directly of your blood, yes...it would also explain why she chose the elder sibling for her goals. You sensed the strength slumbering in them. So would she.

“My mother would, you’re correct. So, too, would my father...” His frown deepened. “Yes, so, too, would my father.”

The stars swirled, briefly losing resemblance to the fabled beast. *Of whom we have heard nothing...*

The man nodded, his focus once more attuned to Sanctuary. “Yes, and that troubles me more than anything.”

*As it should...*The shape coalesced again. *Yes...a more active role must be taken, just as you have said...*

Wrapping his voluminous cloak about him, the hooded figure prepared to leave. "As I said," he murmured more to himself than to his vaguely seen companion. "Even if it means revealing my survival to both my parents..."

Mendeln expected to die. He watched as the hammer fell, knowing that he would never move swiftly enough to escape it. None of the words in the strange tongue that he had begun to learn in his dreams came to him. A crushing death was to be his imminent fate, and although he tried to be as detached to that realization as he had become to so many other fateful moments of late, Mendeln nonetheless felt an overwhelming bitterness. He had believed that some other destiny awaited him—

Someone collided with him. Both figures tumbled to the side just as Dialon's hammer smashed into the marble floor, creating a fissure of broken stone more than half a dozen yards in length.

"Next time don't dream. Act," muttered Serenthia in his ear. She leapt to her feet before Uldyssian's brother could offer any kind of thanks...and with good reason. Dialon's effigy turned on her, almost as if, despite the unreadable expression, the statue was furious at Serenthia for taking from it its prey.

Serenthia took aim with her spear, throwing it with accuracy enhanced by her powers. It drove through the giant's chest much the way Uldyssian had earlier sent the arrow through the priest's.

At first, Mendeln thought her heroic action had been all for nothing, for Dialon moved unperturbed by the gap in its torso. After all, it was only animated stone...

But then fine cracks quickly spread forth from the hole, racing along until they covered the statue's body with what looked almost like a web. As the effigy raised its hammer, portions of the giant began breaking off.

Serenthia gave out a warning cry to those in the vicinity of Dialon. They backed away just in time, for the hand wielding the murderous tool chose that moment to break off. As even the statue itself watched, both dropped to the floor, shattering in pieces that spread throughout the chamber.

No sooner had Dialon lost its hand, then the rest of the limb followed. That opened the floodgates, huge chunks of the stone goliath dropping like rain. The effigy looked down at its crumbling body—and the neck snapped.

As the head crashed in front of Mendeln and Serenthia, what was left of Dialon joined the wreckage.

But there were two other giants with which to contend, two giants making savage sweeps across the chamber as they hunted the tinier figures. However, Mendeln gave thanks to whatever watched over the humans, for despite their attempts, the behemoths were having little good luck since the initial slaughter. He wondered at that until he saw the hand of Mefis bounce off of the air just before Romus and a small band of Parthans and Torajians. The bearded man—a villain reformed by Uldyssian—looked to be the guiding force of this group. He stared at the menacing figure, almost seeming to defy it to break through.

There was still a good chance that it might just do that. Mendeln decided that it was time he lent his hand to the matter rather than stand around gaping while others merely struggled to survive. The shadowy gift that *he* had been granted had to be of some use now...

Words finally flowed through his head, words in that archaic language first glimpsed on the stone just outside Seram. They were the ones Mendeln knew that he had to speak and so Uldyssian's brother did just that.

Hands formed into fists, the statue battered at the invisible barrier. Yet, as the first blows struck, the giant was repelled. Cracks materialized in the giant body and chips broke off as if something unseen had fought against the effigy with the same violence with which the latter had attacked Romus's band.

Mendeln allowed himself the ghost of a satisfied smile. Undeterred by the damage to it, Mefis renewed its assault. Yet, each hit caused more and more damage. Driven by whatever dark force had animated it, the giant would not cease. It did not understand that the magic Mendeln somehow knew was making it the instrument of its own destruction.

Romus, on the other hand, evidently understood. He gestured for those with him to remain calm and wait out the situation. The statue of Mefis was strong and that tremendous strength—turned on itself—quickly reduced the giant to a precarious state. At last, great portions of the statue already piled around its feet, Mefis collapsed.

That left only Bala...or, it would have, if the third of the great statues had not suddenly frozen. The robed figure—in the act of leaning down to swat three Torajians with the tablets—teetered, then tipped over. But Bala did not fall in the direction his balance would have demanded. Rather than plunge forward—toward his would-be victims—the effigy went against common sense and dropped *backward*.

Only as it smashed to pieces on the floor did the reason for its sudden and peculiar destruction become obvious. Uldyssian, his aspect

even more grim than Mendeln's, stepped through the immense pile of shattered stone, the path ever clearing ahead of him.

Mendeln did not like what he read in his older brother's eyes. He had not made it clear to Serenthia that Uldyssian faced not merely a pair of demons, but Lilith herself. Had she known that, the merchant's daughter would have attempted to plunge in ahead of even the demoness's former lover. After all, Lilith was as guilty, if not more so, in the death of Achilios than Lucion—who had merely been the physical cause. Lilith it had been who had drawn all of them into this.

Lilith, whose memory would no doubt tear at Uldyssian's heart until he was dead.

Mendeln's brother glared at the losses caused by the statues. "Damn her..."

Fortunately, Serenthia had turned to help one of the injured. That gave the siblings a moment to confer.

"Nothing was resolved..." Mendeln offered.

"Nothing..." Uldyssian continued to survey the dead. "Too many..."

The younger brother refrained from making any comment. He understood that his own recent opinions concerning death did not always sit well with Uldyssian.

What sounded like a great rumble of thunder shook the temple. Uldyssian glanced up, his expression hardening yet further.

"The fires and other damage have taken their own toll. The temple's about to collapse." He stepped past Mendeln. "Leave now!" he shouted to the rest. "Our task is done here!"

It was a measure of the utter command Uldyssian had that no one even hesitated. The dead were left where they were. It was not that they were so readily forgotten, just that the survivors knew that their leader would not have ordered them out without good reason. Some helped in carrying the wounded away, whom Uldyssian would surely attempt to heal later.

Mendeln turned his gaze back to his brother...and his studious gaze noted a sudden strain in the other's expression.

"Uldyssian—"

"I said that we all need to leave now." Uldyssian's voice remained even, but the vein in his neck had begun throbbing.

There was a second rumble, but much more muted. Mendeln noted an increase in the throbbing.

"As you say," he finally replied as calmly as possible. "But the doors are sealed—"

"No, not anymore."

Mendeln took his brother's reply as truth and, sure enough, he turned just in time to see the formerly sealed doors fling themselves

open just as the first of Uldyssian's followers reached them. None of the others questioned this; they had the utmost faith that he would see them through anything.

"They need to move faster..." Uldyssian growled under his breath.

Nodding, Mendeln increased his pace. "Do not lag," he called to the rest. "Be wary but swift."

From farther on, Serenthia caught his eye. Her own gaze informed Mendeln that she understood the truth concerning the situation. Like Uldyssian's sibling, she did her utmost to quietly usher out the others.

Another rumble briefly shook the temple. Cracks appeared in the walls and ceiling, but otherwise the edifice remained fairly intact. The only fragments on the floor were the result of the earlier conflicts.

Mendeln felt the warm night air rush at him as he neared the outside. Aware of what they faced, he counted each step as if they were as important as the beats of his heart. It would have been simple to tell the others to run, to flee from the area before it was too late, but that would have only caused more calamity.

Flames illuminated the outdoors. In their awful light, Mendeln glimpsed some other parts of Toraja. The tree-lined streets were most obvious, their foliage the home of the serka—small simians revered by the populace. There were also the tall, rounded buildings with their columns carved to resemble one powerful beast standing atop another. The work was so intricate that some of the animals almost seemed to be gazing in concern at the conflagration surrounding them. In truth, there would be no stopping the fire from consuming the immediate district, not that Uldyssian would have cared. The serka had long fled the area and everything else here bore the mark of the Triune.

The mix of Parthans and Torajians spilled out beyond the temple grounds. Mendeln finally took a glance back at the giant structure.

Only to his eye was the constant quivering evident in the dark. Flames now covered most of the roof. Crevasses ran over the face of the building and no doubt lined every other part of it as well. Some columns farther on had cracked in half and fallen down. A major fault ran across the base on the western side.

It should have collapsed by now, he decided. *It should have collapsed on our heads...*

But it had not and the taut-faced figure coming up next to him was the sole reason why. Sweat poured over Uldyssian and his breathing came in rapid gasps. His gaze darted left and right, as if he sought to take account of everyone.

"No one remains behind," Mendeln assured him. "No one living, that is. Even the last of the brethren have fled."

"Into the...jungle...if they know what's good for...them," Uldyssian

managed to grate. He stood there, obviously weighing his decision.

"It is safe to let go," his brother softly assured.

Nodding, Uldyssian exhaled.

With a terrible roar and a wrenching of stone from stone, the Torajian temple caved in on itself. Massive blocks of marble tumbled into the courtyard. Bursts of flame shot up into the night as the open air fed their fury. Gasps arose from several of Uldyssian's followers. Romus let out an oath.

Huge chunks of marble continued to spill over the area, yet none of them came close to where the band stood. Even now, some part of Mendeln's brother kept the devastation in check.

Finally, it began to settle down to a mere catastrophe. The fires continued to burn, but the ruins now surrounded them in such a manner that they would not spread much farther. Again, Mendeln knew that this could be no coincidence.

Uldyssian looked past Mendeln, who at the same time sensed what lay behind him. As he turned, the rest became aware of the mass of figures filling the streets. The bulk of Toraja's remaining citizenry stood before Uldyssian and his flock and in that crowd Mendeln noted a variety of emotions.

A grand figure in flowing red and golden robes separated from the crowd. He wore a scarf over his long, bound, silver-colored hair and an intricate gold ring in one nostril. The sunburst design of the ring indicated his high status. The man was lanky and appeared old enough to be the brothers' father. In his left hand he clutched a tall staff with markings etched in silver running along its length.

"I seek the stranger from the high lands, the Ascenian called Uldyssian." "Ascenian" was, Mendeln's party had discovered early on, the term the jungle folk used for the pale inhabitants of such regions as Seram and Partha. The actual meaning was lost even to the locals, but it had come to mean anyone with skin and looks akin to the sons of Diomedes.

Uldyssian did not hesitate to reveal himself, although a few of his converts gave verbal protest at this. Their fear for him was not unwarranted; in addition to the leather-padded soldiers Mendeln noted among the newcomers, there were certainly representatives of the mage clans in the vicinity. They were keeping discreet, though, for although Mendeln knew that they were there, not once did he see anyone who resembled one of the powerful spellcasters. They had their own, internal matters with which they sought to deal; Uldyssian was not yet a problem to the jaded masters in Kehjan.

But after tonight, Mendeln suspected that they would be reaccessing their stand.

“Uldyssian, son of Diomedes, stands before you with empty hands,” Mendeln’s sibling replied, with the same respectful formality.

The elder nodded. “I am Raoneth, Councilor Senior of Toraja. Speaker for the people—” He paused, obviously noting the many darker faces among those following Uldyssian. “—but not for all, it seems. There are many known to me among those who stand with you, Ascenian, a fact that is a marvel and a concern. I was told that only the lower castes found your word of interest and that you promised them the riches of those whose stations are well above...”

“I promise the same thing to everyone,” Uldyssian interjected, his tone only slightly hinting of the anger Mendeln knew he held against those who had spread such rumors to the Councilor Senior. “The chance to achieve what we were meant to be, regardless of our birth! I offer something more than even kings can attain, Lord Raoneth, if one will just listen! I offer what the Triune—and the Cathedral—would never desire for their flocks...independence from their utter mastery!”

Raoneth nodded again. His thin lips pursed and it was evident that he did not entirely like or dislike what he had heard. “The Triune has these past nights been accused of dire crimes, the least of which are too horrendous for me to declare openly here, Ascenian! I have proof from sources as well that you are a danger to the lives of those over whom I watch—”

“You want more damning proof of the Triune’s crimes, Councilor Senior? It lies within those ruins, preserved despite the collapse.”

For the first time, Lord Raoneth looked uncertain. Mendeln, too, was impressed. If he understood his brother as the other did, then even though Uldyssian had let the temple finally fall, he had still shielded the inner chambers from the tons of tumbling stone. An astonishing feat and one done for good reason, it now seemed.

“Perhaps that may be the case,” Raoneth finally went on. “But that does not in itself excuse the case against you, Uldyssian, son of Diomedes.”

“Uldyssian’s no villain!” came a voice that sounded much like Romus’s.

Something flew out of the dark, aiming right for Lord Raoenth’s unprotected forehead. The Councilor Senior had only time to gape as the projectile reached him—

And halted just before it would have shattered his skull.

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Uldyssian muttered, sounding incredibly exhausted. The makeshift missile—a sharp, apple-sized fragment from some corner of the temple—crumbled. A pile of soft ash formed at Raoneth’s sandaled feet.

“By the—” the elder man began, then clamped his mouth. Mendeln

suspected that, like many Torajians, he had likely been about to call upon the Three...Mefis, Bala, and Dialon. It had been pure reflex, though, Lord Raoneth not radiating any of the darkness that *true* converts of the Triune would have. He had been an innocent dupe like the rest...

"I'm sorry," Uldyssian repeated. He turned toward his followers. Although his eyes swept over the entire throng, his brother had no doubt that the one who had used his power to hurtle the missile now felt as if Uldyssian's entire focus was upon him. "Let that never happen again. This isn't the point of the gift we have. To fight for the truth, yes, to fight for our right to be what we are destined to be, yes, but not for mayhem and murder...then we're no better than the Triune."

He returned his gaze to the Councilor Senior, who only now looked up from the ash. To his credit, Lord Raoneth's momentary gaping when he had seen his death approaching had given way again to determination to protect his city and his people.

Uldyssian spoke before the other man could. "We're leaving Toraja, my lord. For the rest of the night, we'll camp beyond the walls. Tomorrow, we'll be gone. I came here to try to do some good, but that good's now mixed with something you and I both find distasteful. That's not what I want...that's not what I ever want."

The Councilor Senior bowed his head slightly. "You are beyond my power, Ascenian. For you to leave Toraja in no more devastation than what has been wrought this night...I can only thank the stars. No soldier shall raise a weapon to you or those who choose to follow you out, not if they do not wish to answer to me. I will brook no more bloodshed."

"One thing only, Lord Raoneth."

The man looked wary.

"The Triune is no more here. If it grows in Toraja again—like a weed can—I'll return."

Once more, Raoneth pursed his lips. "If the evil is as you said, that weed I will personally pluck clean from my city's soil."

That appeared to satisfy Mendeln's brother. Uldyssian did not look at his followers. He merely started toward Lord Raoneth and they, in turn, flowed behind him. The larger mass that had accompanied the Councilor Senior quickly gave way, hundreds of eyes watching with as many emotions as the converts—several of them once friends, neighbors, and family—passed through. The Torajians among Uldyssian's flock eyed their fellow locals with equal intensity, although in their case they radiated the determination of the newly converted. No one was going to tell them that they might have chosen

wrong.

The Councilor Senior bowed his head again as Uldyssian reached him. The latter nodded in turn. Neither spoke, words now past use. Mendeln surreptitiously eyed the Torajian leader. Raoneth was an interesting figure himself; ghosts flocked around the man, but whether family or foes, there was not time enough to determine. That so many did was all that mattered; it bespoke of Raoneth's strong presence. Had the man chosen to follow so many of his citizens in accepting the gift within, Mendeln suspected that Raoneth would have quickly become one of Uldyssian's most promising candidates so far.

And perhaps that is good reason to be glad he did not join, the younger brother considered. Raoneth had been a leader; he might chafe at having to follow.

The crowd continued to give way. Even among the soldiers, there was a mix of expressions. Some looked full of distrust, others full of curiosity.

We will grow in numbers, it occurred to Mendeln. Likely, Uldyssian knew this as well. *We will grow in numbers even before we leave this throng behind.* There would be others, too, who would sneak out during the night to join the camp beyond the walls. Mendeln calculated that not only would all the lives lost tonight be gained back, but that ten times that quantity would be added yet.

"So many," he murmured.

"Yes. So many," Uldyssian replied. At that moment, whatever their own personal changes, the brothers understood one another absolutely. They both acknowledged the growth of what Uldyssian had started, acknowledged that each day would bring more and more into the fold.

And both knew, as well, that all those added souls might yet not be enough...that everyone here and everyone to come might simply end up *dead*.

Four

There was no flaw to the Prophet, not that any could see. He looked so young to his followers, yet his words were wiser than those of any ancient sage. His voice was pure music. He had not the trace of stubble on his young countenance, one barely seeming out of childhood. Those who had the privilege of seeing him close always came away with the impression of handsome, almost beautiful features, yet, their descriptions would have varied based on their own preferences. All would have agreed, though, that his hair, which fell well past his shoulders, was the gold of the sun and that his eyes were a luminescent mix of blue and silver.

He was slim and athletic in the manner of an acrobat or dancer. When the Prophet moved, it was with such grace as even a sleek cat could not match. He was clad in the silver-white robes of the Cathedral of Light, his feet sandaled.

At the moment, the Prophet stood in his glory, having just completed a sermon to more than three thousand eager pilgrims. Behind him, a choir of some two hundred—all of them as perfect in face and form as humans could be—sang the closing praises. The audience remained enraptured, as always. Although the sect had other locations elsewhere, the prime cathedral just north of the capital had a constant flow of newcomers mixing with the local worshippers. After all, here was where the Prophet himself lived. Here was where one could hear his personal words.

I must change that, he thought as he accepted the homage of his followers. *All should know my words personally. Perhaps through a sphere held high by the priests of each location during sermons...*

He locked away the notion for another time, his own interest on a matter far removed from his present circumstances.

The mortal Uldyssian ul-Diomed and his ragtag followers were on the move again.

Long, golden horns blared as he finally turned from the dais. The choir shifted their singing to mark his departure, never once missing a single note. The members were from all castes, all races, but in their joyous harmony one would have had great trouble telling any of them apart.

He was met by two of his senior priests, Gamuel and Oris. Oris had her hair bound back and although she looked old enough to be his

grandmother, her expression could not hide her attraction and love for him. The Prophet could see still how the oval face had once rivaled any of the young ones in the choir, but as with the singers, he had had little interest in the female priest then or now. He was also certainly not inclined toward any male aspect, such as broad-jawed Gamuel's. No, only one being—one female—had ever stirred his passions so... and she was now anathema to him.

"A rich, magnificent speech as usual," Oris cooed. Despite her demeanor around him, she was one of the most able of his servants. Besides, the Prophet could hardly blame her for her admiration. She was only human, whereas he was so much more.

"It sounds so terribly redundant to agree with her on this subject, but, I fear I must again, Great One!" added Gamuel, bowing low. He had once been a warrior and stood half again as wide as his master, but no one doubted which of the two was the more powerful. The Prophet had chosen Gamuel for his role because, in the remotest manner possible, he had been the one mortal most reminding the Prophet of his true self.

"It was good," their master conceded. By the priests' standards, all of his speeches were perfection, but even he had to admit that there was a bit more to this one than many previous. Possibly that had something to do with the current flux; the status quo of which he had become used to suddenly no longer existed. In truth, that both infuriated...and *enticed*...him.

"One sensed the mood shift when you spoke of the Triune," Oris went on, her mouth wrinkling as she pronounced the last word. "There are new rumors of trouble concerning them and some fanatic from the Ascenian regions."

"Yes. His name is Uldyssian ul-Diomed. He has caused the temple much trouble in Toraja. We should hear official word of that very soon."

Neither priest registered much surprise at this knowledge. They had both been around long enough to understand that the Prophet was privy to things that they could never even imagine. Still, he always had them report whatever they heard just as a matter of form. There was always the remote chance that *something* might escape his notice.

Gamuel shook his head. "So near. Will this...this Uldyssian...seek to war against the Cathedral, too?"

"You may assume that, my son."

"Then, we should move against him—"

The Prophet gave the priest the sort of look that a father gives a naive but favored son. "No, good Gamuel, we must move *with* him."

"Holy One?"

But the Prophet said no more. He strode away from his top acolytes toward his private quarters. No one followed in his wake, the glorious master of the Cathedral of Light insisting no servants ever attend him unless summoned. No one questioned this quirk; they were all too enthralled by his holy presence.

For ceremony and the sake of his acolytes' concerns, helmed guards kept watch at the elegantly carved, twin doors. The six stood as statues as he neared.

"Be at peace," he told them. "You are dismissed for the evening."

The senior guard immediately went down on one knee. "Holy One, we shouldn't be leaving our posts! Your life—"

"Is there anyone here who could possibly threaten it? Is there anyone *I* should fear?"

They could not argue with him there, for all knew that the Prophet wielded powers unbelievable. He could defend himself far better than they could. Even the guards understood that they were for show, yet their devotion always made them hesitate to leave.

"Go with my blessings," the ivory youth declared, adding a beatific smile to encourage them to depart. "Go, knowing that you are all in my heart..."

They flushed with pride even as they grudgingly obeyed. The Prophet did not watch them leave. He walked directly to the doors, which flung open by themselves to admit him and then swung tightly shut once he had passed through.

There was little in the way of furniture in the otherwise sumptuous chamber the robed figure entered. A plush, down couch was where his followers assumed the Prophet slept...those who assumed that he slept at all. Beyond that stood several crested, marble stands atop which perched an enviable collection of the finest vases and glass sculptures from throughout the world of Sanctuary. Fresh garlands of flowers draped the walls and vast, tapered rugs with the most intricate, handcrafted patterns covered much of the shining marble floor. The walls also bore magnificent paintings of the natural beauty of every imaginable land, each *personally* dictated to the various artists by the golden-haired figure.

But above lay what most of those with the rare privilege of entering the Prophet's private sanctum thought the true focus. An immense mural covered the ceiling from end to end, each portion of it filled with fantastical images. Creatures thought only myth, landscapes almost surreal, and most of all, a host of exquisitely rendered, ethereal beings flying about through the use of vast, feathered wings sprouting from near their shoulders. The figures were male and female and all clad in gossamer robes; each had features that would have been the

envy of the most beauteous princess or dashing prince. To the careful onlooker, it was evident that they were not merely part of the scenery, but rather that they were the ones *molding* it.

They were angels, as humans portrayed them at least. The Prophet, more the wiser, acknowledged the artisan's exceptional attempt, but an attempt was all it truly was. A mere mortal could not have grasped the true essence of such beings. A mere mortal could not conceive of creatures who were not exactly physical in nature, but instead harmonic resonances.

Yes, a mere mortal could not conceive of angels as they truly were, but the Prophet could.

After all, was he himself not among the greatest of angels?

It happened in a flash of brilliant light a thousand times quicker than a blink. The chamber shook and it was as if a violent wind current erupted from the very spot upon which the gold-tressed figure stood. Gone in an instant was the Prophet, who, for all his perfection, was a mere shadow of the awesome truth. In his place stood a looming, hooded figure with vast wings of flame. Within the hood there was no face, instead a radiance—formed from the blending of both light and sound—so wondrous that it would have been almost blinding to most humans. What appeared to be long, silver hair draping around it was also no more than pure light and sound mixing together.

He was clad in breastplate and robes, the former a shimmering copper, the latter as if sewn from the very rays of the sun. In mortal terms, what had been the prophet seemed now some divine warrior, and in truth, he had faced many a harsh battle against the demons of the Burning Hells.

So many, in fact, that the angel, *Inarius*, had finally spurned the eternal war between the High Heavens and their monstrous foes and set about finding a place for himself far from the struggle. With him he had taken others of like mind, all weary of winning this victory and losing the next, over and over and over.

I SEARCHED FOR PEACE AND WAS GRANTED ITS ILLUSION...
Inarius thought bitterly. *I FOUND MY SANCTUARY AND NAMED IT
THUS...*

But his mistake had been, long before founding Sanctuary, to ever accept the entreaties of a pack of demons also no longer caring which side won. He had compounded that error by falling for the seductions of their leader, whose every words had mirrored his own resolution. It was because of the comingling between the two—and among their followers as well—that Sanctuary had become not only a refuge, but a *necessity*.

Because of her...all this had become...

WOULD THAT I HAD NEVER MET YOU, LILITH...WOULD THAT I HAD NEVER SEEN OR TOUCHED YOU...

But he had and all his regrets were simply that...regrets. Even he could not go back and alter the past. The flight from the High Heavens and Burning Hells, the search for a place for the renegades to live, the creation of Sanctuary...they were all an indelible part of history.

As was Lilith's betrayal.

Inarius gestured and a fiery line split the ceiling down the middle. The chamber shook as a gap opened in the center of the mural.

Without hesitation, the angel soared up into the air and out through the gap.

He had no fear of being noted. The mortals were naturally blind to his presence and his power shielded him from any others who might have been otherwise able to detect the celestial being. Inarius no longer even had to worry about the High Heavens sensing either him or Sanctuary, for he felt at last that his powers were vast enough to keep even the Angiris Council oblivious, especially with the everlasting war to further distract their attention.

And so, for the first time in centuries, Inarius soared high into the sky. He let his wings spread wide as he soaked in the sensation of being utterly free. It had been foolish of him to wait so long to finally fly again. Certainly, it had not been due to fear. No, Inarius realized that Lilith's betrayal of him—even more so than the heinous slaughter of the other angels and demons—had struck him to the very core. Only for that reason had he kept himself confined to such mortal cloaks as the Prophet and others.

NO MORE...NO MORE...AFTER THIS FARCE IS AT AN END, ALL HERE SHALL KNOW OF MY GLORY, AS IS RIGHT... After all, if not for him, none of this would have existed. It was his right, his duty, to keep Sanctuary on the course he had planned. Lilith would be punished, the demons would be ousted, and the troublesome mortal would become nothing but a fading memory. Sanctuary *would* be as he envisioned it...or he would destroy it and begin anew.

The angel arced suddenly, soaring past the gargantuan cathedral and within seconds over the capital. Kehjan the city was vast enough to be a land unto itself and there were some who argued that the surrounding regions had been named for *it*, not the other way around. Such trivial matters were of no interest to Inarius, but he did find the lights from the capital interesting in a crude fashion. They vaguely reminded him of the brilliance of the High Heavens, a place of eternal illumination.

I WILL MAKE OVER SANCTUARY ONCE THIS INCIDENT IS AT AN

END, he swore. *I WILL MAKE MY OWN HIGH HEAVENS, ONE THAT WOULD BE ENVIED BY THE FIRST!* It would require much sacrifice, especially by his mortals, but it would be done. He had too long suffered silently in squalor when, by rights, he could have lived as more befitting his role. He would create a paradise untroubled by petty feuds—

Without warning, a sensation of familiarity struck him so hard that, for a moment, the angel veered off course. Inarius corrected his flight instantly, then immediately turned about.

He had thought it *her* at first, but her presence was already known to him. No, this was another. Inarius felt what to a human would have resembled a fast pounding of his heart. First Lilith...and now one once nearly as close to the angel as she had been.

Above the cathedral again, the glorious figure paused to survey the dark lands surrounding him. Yet, a thorough survey of every direction revealed nothing. The brief glimmer was the only hint of this new return.

BUT, THEN, HE IS CLEVER, EVEN IF EVER MISGUIDED...AFTER ALL, HE MAY BE OF HER CREATION...BUT SO, TOO, IS HE OF MINE...

The resurrection of yet another old—and apparently *living*—memory would change nothing, however. As Inarius descended into the chamber and the ceiling began realigning itself, he already knew that, when the time came, he would treat the other just as he intended his former lover.

Even if it was his errant son.

Uldyssian rose from the simple blanket upon which he slept to a sea of new faces staring apprehensively in his direction.

“I couldn’t get them to stay any farther away,” Serenthia apologized as she came on his right. Her dark hair was bound back and she walked more like a soldier than a merchant’s daughter. Despite her growing proficiency with her powers, she continued to carry her spear in an aggressive grip.

“It’s all right, Serry,” he replied automatically, only afterward realizing that he had slipped back to her childhood name.

Her expression tightened and moistness appeared around her otherwise stern eyes. Only three people had consistently called her by that name once she had grown up. Two of those were dead, the last Achilios.

Rather than try to correct his error and likely compound the situation, Uldyssian focused on the newcomers. They were of all castes

and ages and, as he knew would be the case, there were many children with them. The last greatly concerned Uldyssian just as it had when the Parthans had brought along their own offspring. Children had already died and those deaths more than any tore at his heart. Yet, no matter his entreaties against such, families still joined him.

I should be better able to protect them, he thought bitterly. *If not for the children, then who most am I doing this for?*

He never delved deeper into that question, for the answer ever revolved around *him*. He did this for those who followed his path, true, but also because of outright vengeance. There was no denying that at all, no matter how base such a reason was.

And that made seeing the new children only worse.

Straightening, Uldyssian accepted a water sack from Serenthia. He drank some of the cool liquid, then poured more of the contents over his head in order to wake himself up. Uldyssian did not care what the newcomers thought of his actions; if such a little thing turned them from him, then they were not ready.

But no one left. They all stood patiently waiting. He hid a frown, having secretly hoped that some of the parents would take their young and ease his guilt a little.

"You all come to me for the same reason, I hope," Uldyssian declared. "You know what the gift means..."

Several heads bobbed up and down. Uldyssian estimated more than a hundred newcomers. They filled most of the clearing where he slept. His own followers had blended back into the jungles, watching both hopefully and warily. Each convert was to the others a new miracle.

He saw no reason to waste more time with speeches. He had promised the Councilor Senior that he would take his followers away from Toraja, and Uldyssian had always been a man of his word.

The son of Diomedes stretched forth a hand to the nearest, an older woman whose head was protected by a multicolored scarf. Uldyssian sensed her wonder and fear warring with one another and realized that she had come here alone.

"Please..." he murmured, recalling his own long-dead mother. "Please come to me."

She did not hesitate, which was a credit to *her* more than him. The woman was thin and had a pinched face, but her eyes were a beautiful brown and he suspected that in her youth she had been quite alluring.

No one questioned what an elderly person was doing among the rest. Age did not seem to matter much when it came to the gifts, save that those below ten years seemed to take longer to develop any sign of success. Possibly this was some natural factor to keep them from harming themselves or others, as could sometimes be noted with some

animals.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Mahariti.” Her voice was strong. She did not want others to consider her a foolish old crone unworthy of this moment.

Nodding his approval, the former farmer took her left hand in his. “Mahariti...open your thoughts to me, your heart to me. Close your eyes, though, if you wish...”

She left them open, as he had expected. Again, Mahariti rose in his estimation...

A peculiar buzzing filled the air.

Uldyssian had but a single breath to react. He glared at empty air.

A moment later, three spinning objects converged on his location—and crashed against an invisible barrier as if against walls of iron. The deadly objects tumbled to the ground, where they were revealed as arced pieces of metal with small, glittering teeth all along the edges. Had they struck Uldyssian, he had no doubt that he would have been dead in an instant...and possibly with his head lying unattached to his body.

From among the waiting figures burst two unkempt, insignificant-looking men. Yet, as they charged Uldyssian, their forms shifted and they became Peace Warders.

From nowhere, one produced a short lance that he threw at the son of Diomedes. The sharp tip had an odd red tinge to it. At the same time, the second cast another of the savage metal weapons.

But before Uldyssian could act, the whirling weapon abruptly turned and headed back to its wielder. It caught him in the chest, cutting through the metal breastplate, then the cloth, flesh, and bone underneath. The Peace Warder went flying back among the Tarajians, who just managed to avoid his bloody body before it crashed in an ghastly pile.

Uldyssian concentrated on the lance, but although it slowed, it did not stop. The red tip could only be demonic in origin. Serenthia leapt forward, using her spear to knock it off course. It went spinning past him.

Before the other Peace Warder could do anything else, some of the new Torajians seized him. He let out an oath, which turned into a cry of pain as the crowd began to tear him apart.

This was not what Uldyssian had in mind. This was not battle, but butchery. “Stop!”

As he spoke, he used his abilities to gently move aside those holding the Peace Warder until only the villain himself remained. The Peace Warder tried in vain to regain his limbs. He stood at an angle that should have made him fall on his back, only Uldyssian keeping

that from happening.

The warrior's every muscle strained as Uldyssian loomed over him. One hand twitched and the son of Diomedes noted that a dagger hung near the fingers.

"I can let you take that dagger, if you like," he said without emotion. "But it'll do you no good."

Yet, still the man struggled for the feeble weapon. With a sigh, Uldyssian straightened the Peace Warder, then let the one arm move.

The hand immediately grasped the blade. The Peace Warder raised the dagger up—and to Uldyssian's startlement, slashed his *own* throat.

A hush fell over the throng, but as Uldyssian—stupefied by the suicide—let the bleeding man drop, he saw that they assumed that their leader had caused the warrior to slay himself. They thought that the fatal strike had been Uldyssian's punishment and proof of his power over such assassins.

Still managing to hide his shock, Uldyssian stared at the Peace Warder. The man gurgled twice, his body twitching...then stilled.

All the while he wanted only to kill himself! He'd failed and knew no other course... Such fanaticism astounded Uldyssian. Perhaps the man had believed that he would suffer some more terrible fate, but somehow, that seemed doubtful. In fact, Uldyssian had been toying with the notion as to how to let the assassin live. Enough had perished last night, and now with the coming of the new day, more bloodshed had happened. He was sick of it all.

But you chose this course, he reminded himself.

"Master Uldyssian! Master Uldyssian!"

Uldyssian gratefully looked to Romus, any interruption welcome. The former criminal pointed behind himself, where two other Parthans were dragging a limp form toward the rest.

A third Peace Warder. Only now did Uldyssian think of the fact that the first attack had come from farther back.

"We found him just within the jungle," explained Romus, rubbing his bald pate.

As the other Parthans dropped the body, the cause of death became very evident. Someone had expertly cut down the assassin with an arrow to the base of the neck, apparently relying on honed talents rather than still questionable powers.

It was yet another death, but one that could not have been avoided. The Peace Warder had brought it on himself. "Good work, Romus."

"Wasn't my doin', Master Uldyssian."

The other two also shook their heads. Uldyssian digested this for a moment. "Then who?"

But no one took credit.

Frowning, Uldyssian knelt by the body. The shot had been an excellent one, as he had earlier noted, the work of a obviously skilled archer. A slight shift in direction and either the shot would have missed or the armor would have deflected it.

There was a dark substance on the shaft. Uldyssian rubbed some of it off. His brow furrowed in perplexity.

It was moist dirt...moist dirt covering most of the arrow, as if someone had once *buried* the bolt.

Five

He was cold. Even in the steaming jungle, he was cold. In fact, he was never warm anymore except when near them...or perhaps *her*. Yes, he thought it was likely her. Who else could it be?

It had been a risk, taking such action, but the Peace Warder might have otherwise escaped. Whether that counted for something, his dulled mind could not say, but he had decided it was best not to take a chance. An arrow through the neck had done the trick.

But now he had to move away as quickly as possible from the others. He dared not be seen. They would identify him as a threat... and he was not so certain that they were wrong.

The bow slung over his shoulder, the figure pushed through the thick plant life. Now and then, when he was forced to lean against a trunk, he left in his wake fragmented handprints of dirt. Soft, moist dirt. It seemed no matter how much he tried to wipe his hands clean, there was always more.

He suddenly tensed, aware that he was no longer alone. Something large but lithe slipped through the jungle, aware of his own movement even though he had thought his steps silent. One hand slowly went for the bow—

A savage, feline countenance with two long saber teeth thrust through the brush ahead. The jungle cat snarled.

But just as quickly, the snarl turned into a hiss. The beast recoiled.

He lowered his hand. He should have known that there would be no danger. Like all animals, the cat could sense the wrongness of him.

As much out of disgust for himself as it was impatience to end this little farce, he took a step toward the great feline. The cat immediately retreated an equal distance, spitting as it moved.

“I have no...time...for you...” It was the first words he had spoken in days and the croaking sound of it repelled him as much as it seemed to the animal. Without any more pretense, the massive cat spun around and fled, his tail between his legs.

The bowman stood there for a moment longer, drinking in the creature’s reaction. It only verified his own thoughts of what would have happened if anyone had seen him.

But he *had* to stay near. Not only because he wanted to, but because something *compelled* him. Even now, the urge to turn about grew stronger. It would not be too much more before he would have

to turn back. He could even count the number of steps left, but still he knew that he would try his best to add just one. An innate stubbornness demanded that much independence of him.

The cat was long gone. Shoving aside a broad leaf the size of his head, he moved on.

Behind him, on the leaf, he left yet another dirty print.

It took well into the morning to deal with all the new converts, but despite his promise, Uldyssian refused to leave until everyone understood just what it was he had awakened in them. That did not mean that they would be able to wield any power, but at least there was a chance that it might somehow serve them should danger rear its head...which he felt it would soon enough. Fortunately, other followers, especially the Parthans—who had been able to practice longer—would be constantly trying to encourage their Torajian brethren.

“Nephalem” had been Lilith’s word for what they were becoming, but that word not only left a bitter taste in Uldyssian’s mouth, but also did not fit right...at least where he was concerned. From the Torajians, he had come across another title, an ancient one that even sounded a little like the first.

“Edyrem.” It meant “those who have seen” and to Uldyssian that was a perfect description of him and the rest. He had already used it this very morning and seen how easily it slipped off the tongue. Already, many were using the term rather than the old one...

They left the vicinity of the city the moment he was done. Despite the sun being high in the sky, it seemed almost like dusk. The foliage was so thick that the light came for the most part in minute shafts. That was not entirely undesirable, for the jungle already sweltered. The Torajians did not mind it so much, but most of the Ascenians—Uldyssian included—were already covered in sweat.

The one obvious exception was Mendeln, naturally. He trudged through the jungle as if more comfortable in it than even the locals. With his dark garments, Uldyssian’s brother should have been dying under the sweltering heat, but not one drop of moisture had so far formed on Mendeln’s calm countenance.

Uldyssian’s gaze shifted to Serenthia. She, like him, showed signs of the heat, albeit not quite so severely. He looked at her closely, seeing for the first time how beautiful she was as a woman, not simply a friend he had always thought of like a sister. How he envied now Achilios’s place in her heart, a place he had once held, but had squandered. Any thought of making an advance toward Serenthia Uldyssian quickly crushed; he still felt directly responsible for the

archer's terrible demise.

Serenthia paused to drink from her water sack, but as she lifted the opening to her lips, her grip slipped. The sack fell, its contents spilling all over the ground.

He reached for his own. "You can drink some of this."

Retrieving the sack, Serenthia shook her head. "Save yours. We passed a stream just a few yards back...and besides, this'll give me a chance to deal with some private matters."

"Someone should go with—"

She gave him a grateful smile. "I'll be fine. You'll probably be able to see the top of my head most of the time."

That still did not satisfy Uldyssian, but he knew better than to argue with her. Signaling the others to keep moving, he stood firm where he was. "I'll be right here. I won't go anywhere."

Again, Cyrus's daughter smiled. Uldyssian found he liked when she smiled at him.

Serenthia rushed off. A few of the others wanted to stay with Uldyssian, but he politely refused their company. Despite the shifting greenery and the shadows caused by the thick foliage, Uldyssian did the best he could to keep some part of her in sight at all times. As she had said, the stream was right beside them; in fact, others had used it before Serenthia. There was really no reason to be concerned...

But then, that was not the first time that he had thought that...and been proven horribly wrong.

Serenthia bent down, for the first time vanishing from his field of vision. Uldyssian held his breath...then exhaled as she rose again.

She glanced over her shoulder and with a wave of her hand, commanded him to look away. Despite his trepidation, he finally obeyed.

There was a rustling of leaves, then silence. It occurred to Uldyssian that he could use his powers to check on her location, but suspected that Serenthia would, with her own, notice him doing just that. However, considering her present circumstances, the former farmer shied away from doing so.

There was a muffled sound from Serenthia's direction. Uldyssian peered around for her. With relief, the dark-haired woman's head reappeared. Seconds later, Serenthia slipped back to join him.

"I was worried...for a moment," he admitted.

Much to his surprise, her eyes brightened at this comment. Serenthia put a hand to his cheek. She smiled almost shyly.

"I like that," the merchant's daughter finally murmured.

Then, her face reddening, Serenthia rushed on, briefly leaving a befuddled Uldyssian to try to understand just what the incident

meant, if anything. Then, forcing such dangerous thoughts from the forefront, he hurried after the rest of the party.

They did not head toward the capital, as some thought, but rather, farther south, toward where the main temple lay. It was not what Uldyssian would have chosen, but Lilith had forced his hand. Despite her acting as if she *wanted* him to destroy the Triune, he somehow felt that if he went directly for their supreme headquarters, it would be more than the demoness expected. Uldyssian hoped in that manner to throw her off guard.

Unfortunately, he also suspected that he was still playing into her hands.

The makeshift army paused near a river that, according to the Torajians, flowed between the southern gates of the city and the lands owned by the Triune. Uldyssian saw the river as the perfect guide for the rest of their journey. Romus and some of the others located the best area for the camp and the nephalem started to settle down for the night.

Recalling the river reptiles that Achilios had caught, Uldyssian made certain that not only did his followers steer clear of sleeping too close to the water, but that no one went alone to it for any reason. Even then, those small groups who did head to the river were to alert other people of the fact first.

“We should be able to fear nothing,” he remarked sarcastically to Mendeln. The two sat alone near one of the many fires. “That’s what these powers should mean, but look at us...”

“They are learning rapidly, Uldyssian. Have you not noticed that the more converts you gain, the more of your followers increase their abilities and quicker?”

“They need to! I’m marching them into a war with demons and magic and who knows what else!” He buried his head in his hands. “Will they be ready for that, Mendeln? You saw how it was in Toraja...”

“The lesson of Toraja is burned into all of us, brother. The next time will be different.”

Uldyssian looked up, his eyes narrowing. “The next time. What did the Torajians call the place?”

“Hashir. It is smaller than Toraja.”

“But somehow I doubt it’ll be any easier.”

Shrugging, Mendeln replied, “What will be will be.”

The younger brother stood up, and with a pat on Uldyssian’s shoulder, walked off. Uldyssian sat there, watching the flames and

recalling the ones engulfing the temple and parts of Toraja. Would it be like that all over again? How many would perish this time? He had felt so determined after Lucion's destruction, but Toraja had taken much of that from him, not that he let anyone other than Mendeln truly know that.

"You shouldn't fret so, Uldyssian. It's not good for you or for those who follow you."

He looked up to see Serenthia step into the light of the fire like some night spirit. Her hair flowed loose and Uldyssian was surprised at just how long and lush it had gotten.

"I thought you were asleep," he replied.

"Sleep..." Brushing back some hair, she sat down next to him. "I don't sleep as much as some think, Uldyssian."

That was something that he could understand, often suffering it himself, but to hear that Serenthia shared the problem worried him. "You should have said something..."

Her eyes glistened in the light of the fire. "To you? How could I bother you, when you've got so much with which to deal?"

As she spoke, she leaned against him. Her nearness both stirred him and added to his guilt.

"I always have time for you," he heard himself say.

Serenthia touched the back of his hand. "If there was anyone I'd turned to, you know that it would be you, Uldyssian. And you know that I would be there for you, also. I've always been there for you..."

He remembered all the years that she had followed him around, waiting for the farmer to notice the young girl who had become a woman. Uldyssian had, but unlike most of the other men in Seram, not in the manner in which Serenthia had hoped.

But now, at a time when he least wanted to, he was noticing her as she had once dreamed.

She leaned closer...too close. "Uldyssian—"

Caught between desire and loyalty to a lost comrade, Uldyssian tried not to look directly into her eyes—

And, in doing so, saw something all but shadowed by the nighttime jungle.

With a gasp, he leapt to his feet.

"Uldyssian! What is it?"

He instinctively looked down at her, then quickly returned his gaze to the wilderness. However, all that met his eyes were darkened trees and vines. Nothing else. Nothing remotely resembling a human shape.

Nothing, certainly, resembling a figure with a pale face draped by blond hair, a figure whom he had taken for someone long dead.

"*Achilios...*" Uldyssian whispered. Without thinking, he took a step

toward the jungle.

“What did you say?” asked Serenthia, suddenly standing in his path. “Did you see something out there?”

“No...nothing...” He could not tell her that he had just seen a ghost, a dead man walking. After all it had only been his own guilt that had manifested the vision. They had left Achilios buried far, far behind them...

To his further dismay, Serenthia put her palms on his chest. She looked up at him. “Uldyssian—”

“It’s late,” he interrupted, backing up from her. “We should do the best we can to sleep, Serry.” He purposely used the other name this time, hoping it would douse the volatile situation.

She frowned, then nodded. “As you say.”

Uldyssian expected her to say more, but she suddenly turned and headed deeper into the encampment. He watched her vanish among the others, then sat down by the fire again.

Staring at the jungle, Uldyssian suddenly probed the shadows. There was nothing, though, and he had not thought that there would be. It had been his own regrets, nothing more.

Achilios was dead...and for that reason alone, Uldyssian could *never* allow things to grow between Serenthia and him.

Mendeln jolted to a sitting position, the sensation of something awry filling him. He hated when that particular sensation occurred, for it usually presaged imminent disaster for all. Quickly peering around, he saw no reason for his concern, but that did not assuage him in the least. His brother and he dealt with far too many dangers that kept themselves hidden until ready to spring upon the pair.

Moving silently, Mendeln rose from his blanket. Unlike most of the others, he did not sleep near the fires, preferring somehow the quiet dark of night over the protective light of the flames. Another change from the young boy who had always huddled closest whenever the last glimmer of day had passed.

His first concern was Uldyssian. With catlike movements, he stepped among the sleeping edyrem—as they were now apparently to be called—until he located his brother. Uldyssian slept fitfully and alone, Serenthia nowhere in sight. Mendeln felt mildly disappointed about the last. With Achilios dead, he had hoped that the two would find one another. Certainly, they deserved a little bit of happiness. Of course, his brother likely still felt too much at fault over the hunter and Serenthia had long ago given up trying to catch Uldyssian’s eye.

Would that my concerns would all revolve around something so

mundane as love, Mendeln finally thought. *Matters would be so much more simple.*

But if it was not any imminent danger to Uldyssian, then what troubled Mendeln so? As he wended his way back to his sleeping place, he considered the event again. No dream of significance came to him. No sound had touched his ears. By rights, he should still be fast asleep.

Mendeln looked about and only then noticed that the area was devoid of his own companions. There was always a ghost around, some shade who could not immediately detach itself from his presence. The party had left Toraja not only with new converts, but also several dozen specters who, for the most part, had perished in the struggle. Many had disappeared along the way, but a few new ones had joined during the day's march. Most of those had been unlucky hunters or travelers who had fallen victim to the dangers of the jungle. Like the rest, they appeared to be wanting something from Mendeln, but when it became clear that he would not give it to them, gradually faded away once more.

But rarely did *all* of them disappear.

Curious, Mendeln headed to the edge of camp. He could see far better than anyone else in the dark, but still all he noted was more and more shadows.

And yet...was there a slight movement well to his right?

"Come to me..." he whispered. The first time he had spoken such words, it had summoned the ghosts even closer to him. Normally, Mendeln kept from summoning them, but if this specter had significance to him and his brother, it behooved him to find out.

But the shape did not drift forward, and in fact, the more Mendeln eyed it, the less certain he was that he had seen correctly. Now it *did* resemble some fern or other plant, not a man...

But the sensation continued to press at his mind. Exhaling in exasperation, Mendeln entered the jungle. He knew that he took some risk, for while the insects that plagued most of the others stayed clear of him, he did not know if the same held true for the huge carnivores of whom the Torajians spoke.

In his eyes, the jungle at night was lovelier, like a beautiful, mysterious woman. The dangers hidden by the dark made that woman only more thrilling. As he forayed deeper, Mendeln marveled that such imagery would occur to him. Yes, he was definitely no longer the frightened child he had been even after growing up.

The shape Mendeln had noticed had to be near, but now nothing he saw even remotely resembled it. Had it been, after all, his imagination or had whoever he had seen retreated once discovered?

A hand touched his shoulder.

He spun about...and found nobody behind him.

"Who are you?" Mendeln whispered.

The jungle remained steadfastly silent. Too silent, in fact, for a place where the calls of the daylight were often but a murmur compared to those beginning once the sun was gone. The jungle held more life in it than a thousand Serams, yet none of that was apparent now. From the smallest to the largest, the fauna was conspicuously absent.

But no sooner had Mendeln thought that when the leaves to his left rustled...and a form moving on two legs slipped by at the edge of his vision.

"Spare me your tricks and games!" he growled. "Show yourself or else!" Mendeln had no idea exactly what "or else" might be. In past circumstances of danger, he had suddenly spouted words in an ancient tongue he had never known, words of power that had saved him more than once. However, whether those words would protect him from the lurker, he was not so certain.

It moved again, this time to his right. Mendeln automatically spouted a word—and a brief, gray glow filled the immediate vicinity.

But what he saw was not at all what he expected.

"No..." Uldyssian's brother rasped, refusing to accept what that momentary glow had revealed. "No..."

It had to be a delusion...or a trick, he thought. Yes, that made sense and hardened his resolve. Mendeln could think of only one being who would do such an obscene thing.

"Lilith..." And here he was alone, a fool overconfident in his feeble abilities. No doubt the demoness was readying the fatal blow. How would it come? Mendeln would perish in some monstrous manner, naturally, his death drawn out.

Oddly, death itself did not disturb him. It was the part just before that which Mendeln wished to avoid.

He would not show her any fear. If somehow he could use his demise to help or at least warn Uldyssian, then that was something. "Very well, Lilith. You have me. Come and do what you wish."

Words formed on his tongue. His hopes rose slightly. He knew that the words' power would give him some chance to at least stave off the inevitable...

Something whizzed past his ear. There was a grotesque, bestial howl, followed by a dull *thunk*, as if something had collided with one of the many trees.

Mendeln peered in the direction of the howl and saw something sinister standing against one of the thick trunks. When he saw that the

thing did not move, he finally approached it.

It was a morlu...a morlu with an arrow through the throat just where the helmet and breastplate left only half an inch of space. Mendeln started to reach for the arrow, its presence stirring another nightmare—

The morlu lifted his head, the black pits staring at Mendeln. The warrior grasped for Uldyssian's brother.

The same words that he had earlier used on one of these fiends in the house of Master Ethon spilled from Mendeln. As they did, the morlu's grasping hands twitched wildly. A gurgle escaped the pale lips.

The morlu slumped again, only the arrow pinning him to the tree keeping the bestial figure from falling at Mendeln's feet.

Without hesitation, Mendeln put a hand over the monstrous warrior's chest. Other words, again first used in Partha, sprang easily from the lips of Uldyssian's brother.

Most would have been unable to see the small, black cloud that rose from the morlu. It hovered over Mendeln's palm. He stared at the foulness for a moment, then snapped shut his hand.

The cloud vanished.

"No more will you be raised to do evil." Whatever darkness animated a morlu, gave it semblance of true life, would not be able to resurrect this particular corpse. Mendeln had made certain of that.

But there still remained whatever had initially rescued him from the Triune's servant. Mendeln finally touched the arrow, noting with mild dismay that there was dirt all over the shaft. Just like the arrow that had slain one of the Peace Warders.

"It cannot be...he is dead..."

But life is only a robe which all wear but fleeting...

Though the thought flowed through his mind, Mendeln by no stretch of the imagination believed it his own. He had felt that other presence in his head before. It had always guided him, yet, now what it said only made Mendeln more anxious.

"No!" he growled at the darkness. "He is dead! To think otherwise is evil! He is buried! I was there! I chose the spot! I chose—"

He had chosen to bury the body very near an ancient structure bearing the same sort of markings as the stone near Seram. Mendeln gaped at his own naivety. Why did he think that he had chosen that very location? Something had urged him to do it and he had blithely acquiesced.

Shaking his head, Mendeln backed up—

And collided with another form.

Uldyssian's brother spun around...and stared into the pale, dirty

face of Achilios.

Six

Astrogha was a demon of ambitions. He had sat near the taloned hand of Diablo, the greatest of the Prime Evils, and had learned well. It had always chafed him to be subservient to Lucion, but then Lucion had actually been the son of Mephisto so there had been little he could do about it.

But Lucion acted strange of late. In his persona of the Primus, the archdemon had always done things in a certain manner, but since his return from some mysterious foray, that had changed. Had Astrogha not known better, he would have sworn that it was no longer the son of Mephisto who sat upon the Primus's throne. That was impossible, surely, for who could ever masquerade as Lucion?

The demon shifted in his shadowed web, located now in one of the high towers of the Triune's supreme temple. Astrogha had chosen the one dedicated to Dialon, naturally, that being the spirit who was, in fact, his master, Diablo. Around the brooding demon crawled his "children," sinister black spiders of every size, some as big as a man's head.

Astrogha was a demon of many incarnations, many shapes. For this moment, he wore a form both arachnid and human, a macabre mix of the two. He now had eight limbs, broader and thicker than any spider, which could be used as arms or legs, depending on circumstance. All ended in clawed digits perfect for rending soft flesh, the better to stuff it into a maw with not only fangs, but jagged teeth that looked as if they had been filed. Astrogha's torso was generally humanoid in design, but rounder and broader at the shoulder. He could make it otherwise, should the mood suit him.

Atop his head were eight more smaller limbs, each ending in human hands. They were good for dragging prey closer to his mouth and for plucking tiny vermin from his black-furred body for the occasional snack in between.

His eyes were crimson orbs clustered together, each lacking any pupil. With them, Astrogha saw in almost every direction and beyond the sight of most mortals or even demons. With them, in fact, he could see back somewhat into the Burning Hells, where he would now and then report to his lord and master.

Astrogha was overdue to give such a report. He did not like stirring Lord Diablo's ire, for it would be a simple thing for the great demon to

reach out from beyond to squash Astrogha like a bug.

The arachnid had hesitated to report because he was still trying to assess the change in Lucion. If Lucion was no longer fit to command, then someone would rightly have to step in and take his place...but that would prove difficult, considering Mephisto's role in this. The other Prime Evil would not take kindly to his offspring's role being usurped...unless the results of that proved most promising.

And so Astrogha was debating plots of his own. This human, this Uldyssian, represented both tremendous potential and threat to the cause of the Burning Hell. Humans could become the weapon the demons needed to at last seize total victory from the sanctimonious angels, yet the tendency toward good in them might make them ally themselves with the High Heavens...until the piousness and rigidity of the winged warriors sickened their stomachs as much as it did the demons'.

Astrogha lifted the limp arm from which he had been sipping and drank what was left of the blood within it. The children hungrily scurried over the rest of the emaciated corpse, a young acolyte of the temple no one would miss. Lucion had always permitted him to take the occasional innocent, for did not a demon have to eat, too?

But as he drained the last, a sudden, intense *fear* overtook Astrogha. The demon flung away the arm, at the same time as the children were rushing for the deepest recesses of the corner—not that *any* shadow could conceal either him or them from the cause of their terror.

Barely audible voices filled the chamber. There was a frenetic tone to them that raised the bristled fur covering his grotesque body. Astrogha could sense their pleading, their hopelessness. Their torments were such that he, who had caused so much terror himself over the centuries, shook hard.

Then, eyes that could see beyond Sanctuary now beheld a huge form seemingly halfway between realities. At first, it flowed toward him like an inky shadow, but as he caught better sight of it, he made out faces both human and demonic and all in midscream. The faces constantly melted into one another and none were ever perfectly defined, but rather more as if out of a nightmare.

As the hideous specter neared, Astrogha then caught glimpses of a fiery red shape, huge fists with black talons, and a horrific countenance that was in part a rotting skull with blazing eyes that burned into the arachnid's own. Monstrous, curled horns—like those of a ram's gone amok—topped the thick-browed, scaled head. That shape vanished, to be replaced by a skeletal form in rusting armor and in whose arms it carried rotting organs covered in maggots. Then, that was without warning replaced by a reptilian beast with a maw like a huge frog and a tongue four times forked. The mouth looked wide

enough to swallow a man...or an arachnid as big as one...

The reptilian visage slipped into and out of his eyesight, mixing constantly with the shrieking heads. Yet, at last there came a powerful voice, with each word sounding like the crunching of a spider's tasty flesh. "*Astrogha...Astrogha...I have awaited your word, you pathetic worm...*"

The demon in the web took hope at the mildness of the summoner's anger. "Forgive me...forgive me for my lateness, my lord Diablo..."

The murky form shifted, most of it fading into shadow. Even Astrogha never cared to see his master in all his terrible glory. Some demons had been driven mad by such an audience. Astrogha was stronger than most, but the one time he had been granted a full visualization—and that for only a few seconds—it had left him shivering for years.

"*What of this little mud ball you call Sanctuary?*" Diablo demanded without preamble. His voice touched every nerve in the spider's body, each syllable like a thousand tortures. "*I grow impatient for results from my nephew...*"

There was the opening that Astrogha needed! "Great and glorious Diablo, whose very name sends nightmares to the angels, this one has at all turns your desires followed as best can be done! Ever have I offered noble Lucion my word, my advice, but he listens not! True, the son of Mephisto has so *many* pressures upon him! It is so hard for him to direct all, to constantly plan alone..."

There was a harsh grating laugh that made Astrogha wish that he had ears to cover. Even then, though, that would not have kept the laugh from causing him to quake.

"*The little bug has notions of his own on how the worms of this mud ball should be persuaded to our just cause? Notions my nephew would not hear?*"

"Yes...they have gone unspoken. It is...difficult for this one or any other to understand what noble Lucion thinks and so offer advice to him. His planning grows erratic. He sets a trap for the leader of these mortals, then leaves myself and Gulag—who is but a stinking puddle now—to fend for ourselves against might both angelic and demonic..."

"*So powerful...*" Diablo's tone left no doubt as to his interest. The destruction of his brother Baal's minion was of no significance save that it gave some credence to the belief that the humans would prove very useful soldiers.

"This one would have continued the struggle—Astrogha fears only his master—but Lucion then cast me out and sealed from my view his confrontation with this Uldyssian!"

“And the mortal is not ours even then?”

“Nay! He even just this last eve as Sanctuary counts time ravaged another temple! Yet Lucion not only seems not to care, but this one has not seen him of late...a second inexplicable absence! Our mortal servants are left to their own minds—no good thing coming of that—and this one must sit and wait and sit and wait, when there is much that could be done!”

He expected Diablo to comment, but only silence met the arachnid. That silence stretched longer and longer and the more it did, the more anxious Astrogha became.

At last...

“You have something in mind, little bug?”

“Yes, my lord Diablo...if this one may be permitted to act freely...and possibly beyond what the noble Lucion would prefer.”

There was another silence.

“Tell me, crawler in the shadows, tell me, my Astrogha...”

And, with barely concealed glee, the arachnid did just that.

Mendeln was unusually silent even for him, enough so that Uldyssian noticed. He glanced at his brother as they trudged through the jungle, noting how Mendeln kept his gaze fixed directly ahead. It was as if he feared that he might see something undesired if he looked anywhere else.

Unfortunately, there was too much troubling Uldyssian’s own mind for him to continue to concentrate on Mendeln. It only partially had to do with the dangers ahead. There was also the incident with Serenthia.

She had been open to his advance, that much had been obvious, and he realized more and more that he wanted to pursue the matter. Yet, that meant trampling on the memory of his best friend...

With a grunt, Uldyssian tried to dismiss the subject from his mind yet *again*. There were too many threats merely from the land around them, much less the Triune, to become so distracted. Constantly, he probed ahead, seeking anything that might endanger the others. More than once, Uldyssian had mentally fended off predators. He had also sent several poisonous snakes and one huge constrictor slithering in other directions. It was a constant task; the jungle held so much potential danger that he could scarcely believe it.

At times, the trail turned as dark as night. Footing often proved tricky even for Uldyssian, who was better able to detect the shifting ground. Despite his own powers, he found he had to also rely on a pair of Torajians, Saron and Tomo. They were cousins, Saron the elder

by five years, and had ventured farther in this direction than any of their fellows. They were nearly as skilled hunters in their environment as Achilios had been in his and were chief among those securing food for the rest.

“Watch for the jagged leaf of the tyrocol bush, Master Uldyssian,” Saron told him, pointing to the thick, reddish plant to their left. “To cut yourself on them is to invite its strong poison...” To emphasize that fact, the elder cousin used a spear to lift the lower leaves. The rotting corpse of a small, furred creature lay underneath. Tiny, crimson lizards who had been snacking on the remains darted for the safety of the underbrush.

“Kataka,” Tomo offered. “They resist the poison, but it fills their skin. They can eat the tyrocol’s victims and are poisonous to others because of what they ingest.”

Uldyssian had sensed some threat, but discovering that it was a plant he had to avoid and not some creature made him vow to double his efforts. He believed that he could reject the bush’s poison, but what about those not yet coming into their powers?

“Let all know of the tyrocol,” he commanded Romus and several others. It was not the first such pronouncement that Uldyssian had made and he knew that it would not be the last. It seemed that *everything* in the jungles had some hidden—and oftentimes malevolent—aspect to it.

Their intended destination remained the smaller city of Hashir. As they marched along, they kept a special eye out for any trace of the Triune’s servants. Uldyssian was certain that the three assassins had not been the only ones left. In fact, he somehow felt that the Triune had some part to play in Mendeln’s behavior, but trusted that, if it was necessary, his brother would certainly let him know the truth.

Certainly...

“You seem so lost in thought.”

Uldyssian glanced to his side, startled by Serenthia’s sudden nearness. That he had not noticed spoke volumes concerning the state of his mind. “I have to keep all of them safe and there’s so much here in the jungle compared to home.”

“Yes, Seram seems so peaceful in comparison.” She frowned. “Or at least, it used to be.”

That stirred up his guilt again. “Serenthia...about Cyrus and what —”

“Go no further, Uldyssian. What happened was not your fault. You were hardly aware of the powers within you, much less how to control them.”

Her attempt to placate him did nothing to help Uldyssian.

Nevertheless, he nodded gratefully.

“Nor do I blame you for Achilios,” the woman went on, her glittering eyes snaring his. “Achilios was a good man, but independent. He chose to do what he did. He wouldn’t blame you any more than I.”

“Serenthia—”

Her hand slipped over to his, touching the back so very softly. “Please don’t worry about me so much, especially where Achilios is concerned. I mourn him as a lost friend...but perhaps not the lover I thought he was.”

This admission nearly caused him to stumble in his tracks. “What are you saying? The two of you—”

“Uldyssian, Achilios always cared for me, but you know I”—she glanced away for a moment, her cheeks red from other than the heat—“had other feelings. When I thought that there was no more hope...I think I turned to him for comfort...for...I feel so *guilty*...”

He waited, and when she did not go on, he murmured, “Now you’re the one who shouldn’t.” Uldyssian shrugged, not certain if his next words made sense or not. “You brought happiness to Achilios. He died thinking that you and he were one. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Her hand slipped closer, tightening on his. Uldyssian did not draw back. A part of him felt like he once again betrayed his friend, but another was pleased by what he had heard.

But before matters could go any further, Mendeln interjected himself into their presence. Uldyssian’s brother wore an expression that boded no good.

“There is something in the jungle,” he quietly announced. “Can you feel it?”

His attention brought back to their current situation, Uldyssian now did. He could not fathom what it was, but it was very close. He signaled Tomo over to him.

“Do you know this region? Is there anything we should beware?”

The Torajian considered. “We are beyond where my cousin and I hunt, Master Uldyssian, but I recall a little about the area. It was said that jungle spirits frequent this location, but those are only stories our grandmothers told us!”

“Jungle spirits?” Mendeln seemed to find this of particular interest. “Why here? What is so different?”

“There are ruins here, Master Mendeln.” As with many of Uldyssian’s Torajian followers, Tomo seemed uncomfortable speaking directly with the younger son of Diomedes. “Ones so old the markings are all but washed away. They are nothing but curiosities...”

“We should avoid them, anyway,” suggested Serenthia. “They’re

away from the river, aren't they, Tomo?"

"Oh, yes, mistress." Serenthia was treated with nearly as much reverence as Uldyssian. Tomo and some of the other younger converts also seemed quite smitten with her. "Two or three hours through dense jungle! Not worthy of the time!"

Mendeln looked disappointed. "So far as that?"

"Well...perhaps not so far as that," the Torajian reluctantly admitted. "But far enough!"

Unless they had something to do with the Triune—which evidently they did not—Uldyssian had no use for the ruins. He gestured ahead. "We keep moving. Hashir's our goal. Nothing else."

Yet as they started on again, Uldyssian continued to sense *something* from the general direction of the unseen ruins. He had no idea exactly what it was, but it felt very, very old and somewhat dark of nature. Curiously, there was also a feeling of...of *fury*...that seemed to be growing with each passing moment.

Almost as if whatever it was had taken notice of them.

Uldyssian tried to ignore what was happening, but the fury continued to swell with each passing breath. He finally pulled aside Serenthia and Mendeln and was not at all surprised to discover that they felt it, too.

"We have attracted its attention," his brother agreed. "It is awakening from its death..."

"And what does that mean, Mendeln?" Uldyssian demanded, suddenly growing weary with the mysteries surrounding his sibling. "Just what do you understand about this?"

"More than you, it seems," the other snapped back, his abrupt vehemence matching Uldyssian's own. "I do not walk around oblivious to everything but myself!"

"No, you walk around speaking to shadows and making vague comments, all the signs of madness—"

The eyes of both brothers went wide as they both noticed their odd anger at one another. Uldyssian glanced around them and noticed that many of his followers had paused to stare aghast at the unexpected confrontation.

"It is feeding us its fury," Mendeln declared. "and in the process feeding from that..."

"Get everyone as close to the river as is safely possible," commanded Uldyssian to Romus and others. "Everyone must keep their thoughts calm and if they feel any anger—about anything—they'll keep it smothered or answer to me!"

He was not certain if any of the others would be affected, but did not want to take the risk.

Serenthia brightened. "Tomo! Is there anywhere to cross the river? I thought someone mentioned an area ahead."

The Torajian frowned. "I know of none, mistress, but there could be..."

"I'm certain that I remember right." She looked to Uldyssian. "I'm sure of it. The sooner we find it, the better!"

Uldyssian was glad for her suggestion. A crossing would let them better get to safety. The intensity of the ancient fury was still growing. In fact, he had some slight worry that even the other side of the river would not prove sufficient to escape it.

But at the moment, Uldyssian had no other choice for his people. He waved them on, staying his ground and staring in the direction of the ruins and their malevolent inhabitant. Uldyssian kept his will focused, determined not to let the dark thing play with his emotions.

Mendeln stepped up next to him. "Go on with the rest, Uldyssian. I will stand watch here."

"You take Serenthia and lead the others on," the older brother demanded in turn.

"There is no time for argument—" Mendeln snapped his mouth shut. Uldyssian knew that they had both nearly started another fight. Perhaps it would have been wiser for the pair to retreat, but he felt that so long as the inhuman fury concentrated on them, then the others were in less danger.

Evidently, Mendeln was of a like mind, for he said almost at the same time, "We will stand together, as shields for the rest, then."

They said no more, both shoulder-to-shoulder, staring into the jungle.

But Uldyssian noticed a subtle shift in the monstrous rage. While part of it still focused on the brothers, some of it yet followed along with the fleeing band. He concentrated...and knew exactly why.

"Serenthia!" Uldyssian gasped. "It's turning its evil toward her!"

"But why—" Mendeln began.

Uldyssian did not know why and had no interest in wasting time discussing the devastating discovery. More and more, the dark force turned its attention to the vicinity of their companion.

He knew of only one way to prevent that from continuing. His aspect grim, Uldyssian strode toward the distant ruins. At the same time, he pushed his will ahead, demanding that whatever lurked out there concentrate on him and him alone.

The jungle darkened as he bore toward the hidden site. The cries of the animals and insects faded into the background. As Uldyssian progressed, he noticed that the trees and other plant life took on a shrouded appearance, as if some shadow other than that cast by the

foliage above now settled over them. Limbs took on the appearance of skeletal arms and all the leaves suddenly reminded him of the poisonous plant Tomo had pointed out.

He stumbled over a protrusion in the ground. Glancing down, he saw that it was a piece of stone, but one not naturally formed. Uldyssian extended a hand and the stone flew up into it.

It was from some shattered carving, part of the upper face of what looked to be a woman. What there was to view had an ethereal beauty to it—

A harsh force struck him full, sending Uldyssian flying against a nearby tree. Only his abilities kept his back from snapping in two. The stone went tumbling from his hand...but where he had hit hard, it landed *gently* on the soil.

At the same time, Uldyssian sensed that he was not alone. However, whatever stood with him was not any mortal being. It was not, he knew, even alive in any normal sense.

And this close, Uldyssian understood that it was demonic in origin.

He had slain demons before, but never had he thought what might happen to them after they were dead. He had supposed that they simply ceased to be. Yet, what Uldyssian faced was more akin to a ghost or angry spirit, not a living demon.

How was that possible?

That was not important, though. Protecting Serenthia *was*. “You’ll leave her be!” he abruptly growled, standing. “You’ll leave them all be!”

There was a feeling of immense bitterness and hatred...but not aimed directly at Uldyssian. For him, there was more of a sense of irritation, as if he was merely in the way from what needed to be done.

He decided to become more than that to the angry essence. Staring at the trees before him, Uldyssian pointed.

The jungle exploded, trees collapsing and bits of plant raining down on everything save Uldyssian. Where once the landscape had blocked his way, now a perfect, oval path lay open.

And at the end of it, just visible, was a stone structure tilted at a precarious angle. The roof—once angled, Uldyssian thought—had been crushed in as if by a huge fist. The windows—three in all—were odd in their design, having five sides to them. It appeared as if the building had been carved from stone the color of bone...the same stone as the fragment of face.

Tomo had severely miscalculated the distance of the ruins from Uldyssian and the edyrem. They had virtually been on the very doorstep.

Uldyssian squinted. Near the left side, the side from which the structure tilted away, was a small gap in the ground that he realized was another window. If that was the case, then at least another floor lay buried beneath. That bespoke of not only the great age of the building—for it must have taken centuries to bury the rest—but also some powerful catastrophe that had initially befallen the area.

Every muscle taut, Uldyssian closed in on the building. Tomo had described it as a place with markings all but worn away by the elements, but to the former farmer's heightened senses, there were still symbols and illustrations quite evident on the face. What the language was, he did not know, but the images were at least somewhat recognizable. Many looked as if they were of the same ethereal female, only now on a few she was accompanied by a tall, almost menacing figure. Yet, between the pair there was no sign of menace...but something more resembling *love*.

The two never looked quite the same in any relief, but there was just enough to make Uldyssian certain it was always the original duo. Recalling how easily Lilith could wear other guises, he finally assumed that, if these were anything like her, they probably had a thousand shapes from which to choose. These had likely just been *favorites*.

At that moment, a voice whispered in Uldyssian's ear, but its words were unintelligible. He hesitated, then took a step forward.

An image flashed through his head. A beautiful woman with wings—of *fire*?

The face had looked familiar, but only after a moment did he recall it as the one from the reliefs and the shattered carving. None of the works had done justice to what he had just seen, though...and again Uldyssian knew that even the vision had only shown him a shadow of her true glory.

Uldyssian took a cautious step forward...only to be met by a second vision. Here was the winged woman with the male who, while strikingly handsome, had skin of absolute white and two ice-blue orbs without pupils. They stood together in what was clearly a scene of deep affection, despite obvious differences between them.

Again came the whisper, the words no more understandable than before. Suspecting what would happen next, Uldyssian nonetheless moved on.

It was the unearthly couple again...but now the winged woman lay torn to shreds on the ground. The male, his legs ruined and his back cut open so deep that he should have been dead, crawled toward her. A green ichor poured from his wounds. He bared teeth that were as sharp as those of the river reptiles. The male pounded the ground in growing rage and the tears dropping from his face sizzled when they touched anything else.

Behind them, fallen at the angle that he had first seen it, was the white structure...all four stories of it. Something had crushed in the roof, as Uldyssian had already noted, and then had demolished the base on the right as well. The landscape beyond was also in ruins, but in place of the jungle, trees akin to those of which Uldyssian was familiar from Seram dominated...or had until their destruction.

The vision...the longest of all...faded. As Uldyssian shook his head to clear it, he felt the presence that he had been combatting suddenly reach far past him...for Serenthia.

Recalling himself, Uldyssian sought some manner by which to redraw the thing's attention to himself. On a hunch, he eyed the ancient building. It did not take much of his power to start the edifice shaking. Bits of stone quickly began breaking off.

But no sooner had he started than he was battered to the ground by what could only be described as pure rage. Uldyssian cried out from pain, realizing that he had obviously underestimated the malevolent force's determination. In his head, he heard howling and more words he could not understand. There was also a sensation of terrible loss, which under the onslaught, did not in any way cause him to sympathize with his attacker. Uldyssian had no idea what had provoked the spirit, wraith, or whatever it was, only that he had to stop it from hurting Serenthia...and him, too.

Straining, Uldyssian lifted his head. Through his tearing eyes, the land took on a surreal effect. In it, he almost imagined that he saw the male figure—a demon, he felt sure—standing over the ruins like a protective and enraged guardian.

And a moment later, that guardian reached a giant hand toward him.

It did not take imagination to know what might happen if that hand enveloped Uldyssian. The human focused on shielding himself.

But the giant vanished, replaced by a savage onslaught of broken branches, loose stones, and more...the refuse of Uldyssian's own earlier action to clear the path. The pieces struck at him from all sides, guided by such force that they pressed closer and closer despite the human's tremendous efforts. The jagged ends of branches scraped the air within an inch of his face. Rocks flung past Uldyssian's eyes at a speed far greater than that of the swiftest bird and more than enough to crack a skull. He felt the ground below shake up and down, as if something beneath sought to reach up and take him...

He had demanded that the demonic essence pay heed only to him and now Uldyssian had been granted that demand. All he had to do now was survive...if possible.

But if he did not, then surely it would pursue Serenthia again.

Uldyssian had to assume that, in its madness and outrage, the demon had somehow left some part of itself behind after it should have died. That part now evidently wanted Serenthia to replace its lost mate.

He had to end this. If Lucion, a powerful demon, had been unable to stop him, then surely Uldyssian could defeat this undead presence.

Again, he concentrated on the ruins. They seemed a distinct link to the demon. Forcing one foot forward after the other, Uldyssian tried not to notice how much closer the attacking fragments got despite his efforts...not even when one branch caught him over the brow, leaving a minute but telling trail of blood that he had to blink away while never losing sight of his own goal.

The ancient building shook anew, this time harder than ever. A portion of the right wall cracked off, sending what little remained of the roof into the trees. One of the windows lost all definition as portions of the border crumbled.

The voice shrieked in Uldyssian's head. Something grasped his ankle, jarring Uldyssian's attention despite his best efforts.

A fleshless hand—human-looking save for the fact that it had four digits and long, long nails—tore at his skin. Only then did it flash through Uldyssian's mind that the male figure in the visions had had hands just so. A demon's hands.

A second hand thrust out of the soil, this one still covered by a bit of ragged skin as pale as the bone. Uldyssian pulled away from the first, only to fall backward over some unseen obstacle.

Out of the ground burst a misshapen thing, the demon who was and was not dead. His bones were not bones as humans knew them, for they were segmented differently and what should have been the rib cage was solid. It amazed Uldyssian that this demon had bones at all—the hideous beast Gulag apparently having none—but his ilk seemed to come in a monstrous variety with no two alike.

The head tilted at one angle and the jaw hung slack. There was nothing handsome about the creature anymore, the carrion eaters—a centipede made a hasty retreat into an eye socket—still working after so long.

Then, to Uldyssian's greater surprise, Mendeln—whom he had assumed had wisely stayed with the rest—stepped past him. There was an unsettling aura about his brother.

Mendeln stood before the macabre creature, arms spread wide. He shouted something in a language that Uldyssian did not understand... but suddenly realized was close in tone to what the demon had been spouting.

The ghoulish figure hesitated. Although the eyes were gone, he gave every indication of staring at Mendeln in something approaching

surprise.

But if the demon radiated surprise, so, too, did Mendeln, who clearly expected something more to happen. He shouted out another word, one that, despite being unknown to Uldyssian, sent chills down the older brother's spine.

This had more of an effect, but still clearly not quite what Mendeln had hoped for. The macabre figure teetered like a drunken fighter, then righted himself. The sense of menace grew, but also one of uncertainty, as if the demon was not quite sure what to do, either.

"He still lives..." murmured Mendeln more in fascination than anything. "No...he clings between life and death fueled by a desire for revenge...and a loss so great he still cannot accept it..."

Uldyssian did not care for the reason, only that they had to stop the fiend. Steeling himself, he glanced at the ruined structure yet again.

The walls cracked apart. The building let out a groan...and finally crumbled much as the temple in Toraja had.

But even then, the demon did not fall.

Uldyssian rose, but before he could prepare anything more, Mendeln put out a hand to stop him.

"Wait! See!"

Suddenly ignoring the intruders, the skeletal figure slowly turned toward the rubble. He raised his monstrous face skyward and let out a roar that Uldyssian recognized as deep anguish.

A small object shot up from near Uldyssian and Mendeln. It flew directly into one of the demon's outstretched hands.

It was the shattered female face.

The demon held the sculpture up and the empty hand reached to caress the piece...and then, to the astonishment of the brothers, both simply faded away.

Expecting some trick, Uldyssian leapt forward. Yet he could now barely sense the demon's presence. It was as if the creature had retreated beyond the mortal plane.

"He has gone back to that place between places," Mendeln muttered. "It is over."

"But why did it *begin*? What stirred that thing to life—or whatever you'd call that?"

His brother shrugged. "As I said. Vengeance...and loss."

Uldyssian recalled the visions that he had had about the otherworldly couple, both so distinctively different from one another. A demon and...and an *angel*, perhaps?

But that was ridiculous. Uldyssian could not imagine a more unlikely scenario. He dismissed the notion, more concerned with another aspect of the situation. "Serenthia. She's safe now, right?"

“It would seem so. You protected her well, brother.”

That reminded Uldyssian of something else. “Yes, and you protected me—”

“But not so well.”

Waving that aside, Uldyssian growled, “You know what I mean, Mendeln! I’ve been patient, but something’s touched you that has nothing to do with the gifts I’ve shown the rest! You’ve changed! Sometimes, I’m not even certain to whom I’m talking!”

The younger brother bowed his head. “Neither am I,” he whispered. “Neither am I.”

“We’ve got to have this out between us,” Uldyssian persisted. “I’ve got to know what’s happening to you...and how it might affect those with us. There are too many things at stake!”

“Yes...I agree.” Mendeln glanced back at the crushed building. “But not here. Not now. Tonight. When all others sleep.”

“Mendeln—”

Uldyssian’s brother raised his hands palm forward. Almost pleading, he added, “It *must* be in the night...and only the two of us.”

Mendeln clamped his mouth shut. Uldyssian knew that he would get no more out of him. Still, “Tonight, then. Tonight and no later. I mean that, Mendeln.”

The other nodded, then turned and walked back. Uldyssian stood for a moment, watching Mendeln’s retreating form. Then, without effort, someone else invaded his thoughts.

Serenthia...

And with her gently smiling face burning into his mind, Uldyssian forgot about demon spirits and mysterious brothers. All that mattered was returning to the others and making certain that she was all right.

After that? Uldyssian could only pray that Achilios—wherever he was—would forgive his friend’s weakness.

Seven

As the sun settled over the horizon, the edyrem began to look for a place to camp. Mendeln, who had steered clear of his brother after the ruins, studied his many companions with an unusual anxiety. He lagged behind as they pushed toward the chosen location—a relatively clear area about ten minutes' walk to the river—then paused by a trunk as if taking a breath.

They had found the crossing of which Serenthia had earlier claimed to have heard about from someone else. A convenient crossing it had been, wide enough to enable several people to simultaneously move to the other side. By the time he and Uldyssian had reached the others, more than a third had already made it, Serenthia apparently leading the way.

She had been most delighted to see Uldyssian, delighted enough to run into his arms. If not for Mendeln's presence, he suspected that the embrace might have led to something more right there. The battle against the creature in the ruins had obviously changed Uldyssian's mind about her and it seemed Serenthia had no more qualms concerning the late, lamented Achilios.

And that now bothered Mendeln more than the danger that they had this day faced.

The last vestiges of daylight had given way to the torches and—more and more—glow lights many of the fledgling edyrem were now able to cast. Some of those Mendeln watched looked much too confident with their minor success; a glow light would scarcely fend off Peace Warders, morlu, or demons.

At last his opportunity came. All eyes were focused on other matters and Uldyssian could only see Serenthia. Mendeln slowly backed into the jungle.

He went headed not toward the river, but rather back along their trail. Despite his heightening anxiety, Mendeln's breathing remained calm. It was as if he were two men in one body, the newcomer adapting to whatever change around him as necessary.

Mendeln counted each step. Twenty. Fifty. A hundred...

At precisely that many, the figure he had been expecting to meet appeared from around a tree as if by magic...which very likely was the case.

"Always...timely...Mendeln..." The voice, so familiar, carried with

it now a raspiness, as if the other constantly needed to clear something from his throat.

Mendeln suspected that what needed to be cleared out was *dirt*.

"I promised I would meet you at the appointed time...Achilios."

A short, harsh chuckle escaped the half-seen figure. The archer took a step closer.

Mendeln did not gasp, having done enough of that the first time he had been confronted by the dead man. After all, before him stood his good friend, even if that friend had a gaping hole in his throat, the edges of which were lined with congealed blood and more dirt. Uldyssian's brother did not bother to wonder how the blond hunter could even speak, considering that awful gap. Achilios existed now because of some force beyond mortal ken, a force surely powerful enough to give voice to the cold corpse it had animated.

But that description seemed cruel to Achilios, Mendeln suddenly decided. Achilios was no shambling ghoul nor a fiend like the morlu. The spark that was the archer did indeed still make house in his remains; there was no doubting that. True, the flesh was as pale as the whites of Achilios's eyes—which were *completely* white now—and there always seemed to be bits of fresh ground spilled over him, but it was still the man the sons of Diomedes had always known. Achilios even showed embarrassment over his condition; even now he tried to wipe his hand clean so that he could clasp Mendeln's.

Rather than let the archer continue a useless task, the black-clad figure reached out and seized the grimy hand. He shook it as he would have if both were still back home and nothing had changed for either. Not even death.

The shadow of a smile escaped Achilios. Even in his present state, he was a handsome man, lean like the prey he had so successfully hunted...until Lucion. Mendeln had always envied the blond hunter his looks, although the latter had never been vain about them. It had been the perversity of fate that he, who could have had so many women, had desired the only one who had not wanted him...until just before his slaughter. "Braver than...you used to...be..."

"You are my friend."

"I am as dead as these tree dwellers I caught." Achilios reached behind him and brought forth a brace of tailed beasts the size of cats and obviously related to them. He set his catch by Mendeln.

The scene both amused and saddened Uldyssian's brother. Even in the state that he was, Achilios could not keep from his calling. Perhaps, Uldyssian's brother thought, it was because it allowed him to play at his former life, to pretend that terrible events had never happened.

"And how may I explain this bounty when I return?" Mendeln gently joked. "All know my prowess with hunting. I am fortunate if I can catch a mushroom, as quick and cunning as they are."

Achilios grimaced. "I...thought of...that...but...I hunted, anyway..."

Again, he attempted to brush himself clean. Yet, although even in the dark Mendeln could see the dirt fly from the archer's pants, boots, and shirt...it almost immediately seemed to be replaced by more simply forming from nothing on Achilios's very body.

"I have spoken with Uldyssian," Mendeln finally interjected, as much to put an end to Achilios's perpetually futile effort as it was to bring the conversation around to the matter at hand. Not the original conversation that they had planned, but the one he now felt superseded all others. "and I have come to a decision. It is time he was told of your presence. I will bring him out here to—"

"No."

Mendeln had expected argument and while he respected his friend's awful position, this was something that could not be avoided. "Uldyssian is your friend, just as I am. He will see beyond what has happened to you—"

The archer's expression tightened, the white eyes narrowing dangerously. "No...Mendeln...it can't...be that way...don't say...any more..."

There was that in Achilios's tone that suddenly made the hair on the back of Mendeln's neck rise. Nevertheless, he grew defiant. "I will not keep this any longer from him—or Serenthia, for that matter! At the very least—"

"At the very least," intoned another voice behind him. "Doing that might cause great catastrophe..."

Mendeln spun around. He knew that voice. It had haunted him long enough, after all...

The tall figure was clad in a dark, cowed cloak that emphasized a face nearly as pale as Achilios's. At a glance, he otherwise looked like any man...save that his features were, despite their angular structure, far too perfect.

"Who *are* you?" Uldyssian's brother demanded. "I know you, but not your name!"

The newcomer nodded. "Yes, we have come to know each other quite well, son of Diomedes...and I thus apologize for what I must do. Unfortunately, you leave me no choice."

"What are you blathering about?" Mendeln backed away from the figure, only to collide with Achilios. Grimy fingers seized his arms, holding him in a literal death grip. "I say again! Who are you? Who?"

“A stubborn fool, that is what I am,” returned the other with a grimace. He raised a hand toward Mendeln.

In it was a dagger...a dagger that, to Mendeln's eye, seemed not to have been forged from metal, but rather something akin to ivory.

Bone?

His tormentor uttered three short words and although Mendeln did not understand them, he still knew the language, of course. It now constantly flowed through his head.

The dagger flared bright, illuminating the cowed face yet more. It was as Mendeln always dreamed it, yet seeing it now, he saw just how *ancient* it was despite a general appearance little older looking than his own.

“As for a name, once I was called else by my mother, but now I am known as...*Rathma*.” He gave Mendeln an apologetic nod. “And now, we must be going.”

“Going? Where—”

But before Uldyssian's sibling could finish, both he and the being called Rathma vanished.

Only Achilios remained, just as the archer had known would happen. He stared at his empty hands, empty of the man he had gripped, but not of the infernal dirt.

“Sorry...Mendeln...” he finally murmured to the empty jungle. With some reluctance, he took up his catch again. “It had...to be...done...”

Suddenly, a sound in the distance made him look toward the camp. Moving in utter silence, Achilios vanished into the dark. He could not let anyone see him, especially Uldyssian, whom he suspected was the approaching figure.

And even more than his old friend, he dared not let *her* know he was near...

Uldyssian stopped suddenly, aware that something was wrong. He had come in search of his brother, who had promised answers, and had been directed by one of his followers in this direction. Uldyssian had immediately sensed Mendeln's nearness...and then the next moment had *not*.

At first, he wondered whether this was some trick of his sibling, some new ability. Uldyssian had no idea what sort of powers Mendeln had nor their cause. He recalled how Lucion had tried to make Mendeln seem like a demon himself or at least someone corrupted by one. Those memories haunted Uldyssian, for despite knowing better, he wondered whether there had been some truth to them after all.

Resuming his trek, Uldyssian finally located just where he had last sensed his brother. However, there was no trace that he could detect of Mendeln's abrupt departure and that made Uldyssian worry even more. Mendeln was not the sort to play games, especially not of this type.

Unable to find his sibling through his abilities, Uldyssian resorted to a more basic approach. He called out Mendeln's name, first as a whisper, then more pronounced when the initial attempt failed to garner results.

But still Mendeln did not appear.

Recalling the dangers of the jungle—both natural and otherwise—Uldyssian's anxiousness grew. Yet, he noticed no hint of anything out of the ordinary.

Bending down, Uldyssian ran his fingers across the soft earth. At the same time, he finally summoned a sphere of soft blue light. Under its illumination, Uldyssian looked for any prints.

He found two that were certainly not his own. They seemed paused just a yard to his left. The stance seemed that of one person waiting for another...but then why was it facing *away* from the camp? Surely, Mendeln would have faced the other direction instead.

Then, another area just to the side of the first caught his eye. Only now did Uldyssian notice that the ground had been turned up as if someone had moved about much in a very short space. He could not tell with any certainty which way the feet had faced here, but the disturbance of the soil made him suspect that here was where something had gone amiss.

Here was where Mendeln had suddenly vanished from his brother's supposedly superior senses.

Standing again, Uldyssian took a step deeper—

"Here you are!"

He glanced over his shoulder as Serenthia emerged from the jungle behind. With the light away from his face, she could not possibly see the brief look of consternation that he quickly buried. Mendeln had just disappeared; the last thing that Uldyssian wanted was to have the other person dearest to him in the vicinity. Who was to say that the same danger did not remain, waiting the chance to steal her now, too?

"Serenthia...what are you doing out here?"

"Looking for you, naturally." She took hold of his arm, the pressure of her fingers sending his blood racing. "And I'm going to ask you the same question...this is no place to be alone."

"I thought I heard something," Uldyssian responded lamely. "I was wrong, I guess."

She leaned close to him, staring into the wild. "You were afraid it

was that—that demon—from across the river, weren't you?"

He knew that he should not lie, but nonetheless, he answered, "Yes. I thought that."

At first, that seemed to satisfy her, but then the merchant's daughter suddenly asked, "Uldyssian, have you seen Mendeln?"

"Mendeln?"

"When I went looking for you, I also asked about him. I assumed that the two of you might be together." Her grip tightened as she continued surveying their dark surroundings. "I thought...I thought I sensed him here...but I must've been wrong."

Uldyssian smothered a curse. Of course, of all the others, Serenthia had come the closest to matching his abilities. Why would she not then be able to do as he? But the fact that she had gained that gift meant that it was harder—no, *impossible*, Uldyssian decided—to keep her from the truth.

He put his other hand on hers. "Serenthia...I did come out here looking for Mendeln. We were supposed to meet. He wanted to tell me about...about what he's been having to deal with. The changes *he's* been going through..."

She did not press him on those details, more concerned with the most immediate one. "Then, where is he?"

"I don't know."

Her fingers squeezed his arm with astonishing strength. Serenthia quickly looked left and right, as if Mendeln would suddenly appear. "But he has to be nearby! I was *right* when I thought I sensed him! You did, too, didn't you?"

"I did...and then he simply wasn't...there." Stating that now, so bluntly, shook Uldyssian to his core. His brother—his only *surviving* family—was nowhere to be found.

Her voice firm, the dark-haired woman declared, "We'll search the entire area! He can't be far! He knows he can protect himself, too! We'll find him, Uldyssian..." She touched his cheek. "I promise that we'll find him..."

But although the two of them spent the next several minutes utilizing their abilities as best as Uldyssian knew that they could, they found not the slightest trace. By this time, other voices began rising from the direction of the camp, foremost among them Romus's.

"Master Uldyssian! Master Uldyssian!" The onetime brigand—a low, silver light drifting before him—stumbled into their presence. The bald Parthan exhaled in tremendous relief. "Praise be! We'd feared the worst, we did! Jorda noticed you absent and when no one could find you—" He suddenly stopped short as he drank in the nearness of the two.

Despite the Parthan's conclusion being not entirely amiss, Uldyssian did not want such an image to overshadow his search. "We're looking for my brother," he informed the man. Then, in what was clearly to him evidence of his desperation, Uldyssian actually asked, "Have you seen Mendeln?"

"Nay! I can't fathom when last I did, either," Romus replied with a low bow. "Perhaps...perhaps he merely walks to enjoy the night, him being the way he is—" The Parthan faltered when Uldyssian gave him a reproving look. Most of the edyrem assigned to Mendeln a host of bizarre and mysterious activities, the vast majority of which were the product of their imaginations.

Unfortunately, the few that were not were enough to disturb most folk, even Uldyssian.

But that had nothing to do with finding his brother. As others ignorant of the situation gathered behind Romus, Uldyssian feared that their presence would only further complicate the situation. If something had taken Mendeln—and that thought shook Uldyssian far more than even he could have ever expected—then who was to say that it might not grab others as well. Mendeln was, in truth, stronger than any of the edyrem, yet apparently he had not had a chance...

"I want everybody back in the camp," he commanded. "Go! Now!"

"But Master Uldyssian!" protested Tomo, now standing near Romus. "We must not leave you alone out here!" That Uldyssian likely could defend himself better than a thousand of his followers did not seem to occur to the Torajian nor any of the rest, judging by the many heads bobbing in agreement with Tomo.

"Return to the camp..."

Romus shook his head, blurting, "What of your brother, Master Uldyssian? If he is lost as you fear—"

Now the newcomers knew why their leader was out in the jungle during the night. No matter how great their uneasiness around Mendeln, they knew his importance to Uldyssian.

"They'll not go now," murmured Serenthia. "The only way to get them to return to the camp is to do so ourselves..."

"I can't! Mendeln needs me!"

She put a soothing hand on him. "I know that, Uldyssian. I know that better than anyone else! But think...can you really help him right now, with everyone distracting you?"

Serenthia had the truth of it; all that his legions of followers did right now was to keep him from concentrating.

"We're all heading back," Uldyssian suddenly ordered. "Make sure that everyone is accounted for, Romus."

The Parthan nodded, although obviously still perplexed. "But, your

brother, Master Uldyssian—”

“Will be found, Romus.” Uldyssian put an end to any more questions by striding past his lead acolyte, Serenthia accompanying him on his arm.

But although he took up a stalwart aspect in front of the others, Uldyssian dearly wanted to turn around and rush through the jungle calling Mendeln’s name until he found him. He could not imagine what might have happened. He had sensed nothing amiss. Surely... surely Mendeln was merely lost, somehow, and would turn up before long.

But what if he did not?

“Calm yourself,” Serenthia whispered reassuringly. She leaned her head close to his. “When all have settled down, we can work together to find Mendeln.”

“Work together?”

“Combine our powers together in a manner we haven’t tried yet...I think it possible...”

He took hope from her suggestion. They might be able to amplify the effect of their search. Surely then, they would locate Mendeln.

But would whatever she had in mind work?

“We can only try, Uldyssian,” she murmured, as if reading his thoughts. “You and Mendeln worked together to help me, didn’t you?”

He nodded, glad that she did not know how close the demonic presence had actually come to reaching out to her.

Once they returned to the encampment, it was all Uldyssian could do to wait for the rest to finally go to sleep. The sentries he did not concern himself about; they would not see what he and Serenthia attempted. The two had moved off to a secluded side of the camp. They would still be vaguely noted by those on duty, but not their actual activities. He wanted no one interfering, not even if only to volunteer their help.

Serenthia sat across from him. Both had their legs folded, and as touch had always worked when Uldyssian had introduced new people to the gifts within them, they held hands. Uldyssian felt some guilt at how much he enjoyed such closeness to her. He had not felt this way about anyone since...since *Lilith*.

Smiling at him, Serenthia said, “I’ve no idea how to start...except maybe I could reach into you the way you did me and the others the first time.”

“Try that.” He would have been willing to do it himself, but so far Serenthia had made perfect sense with her suggestions. Considering his state of mind, Uldyssian was more than happy to let her take the lead throughout this.

Serenthia shut her eyes. Uldyssian did the same. He felt her briefly squeeze his hands and returned the action.

Suddenly...it felt as if he were two people in one.

The swiftness with which the merchant's daughter successfully touched his mind—and his soul—startled him. There was a momentary hesitation, then Uldyssian sensed her invite him to do as she had. His thoughts, his emotions, reached out to hers. For a breath or two, it was as if a pair of animals sized up one another. Then, growing more confident, Uldyssian pushed forward.

He and Serenthia melded together. It was not a perfect blending of their selves, for Uldyssian kept up certain barriers—especially those concerning his feelings for the woman before him—and sensed that Serenthia likewise barred some access to her inner thoughts. Yet, they were still linked strongly enough to now attempt what she had proposed.

Let me...came what, to his imagination, sounded like her voice. Let me try to guide us...

No sooner had Uldyssian given his silent agreement, than suddenly it was as if his eyes were open again. Yet, now he soared through the surrounding jungle...and in *several* directions simultaneously. Moreover, it was as if day had arrived, only day lit by a golden sun. Everything was a glorious yellow...

And with him...very much part of him as he was of her...raced Serenthia. Their speed was greater than that of the swiftest bird. As one, they coursed mile upon mile around the region, not only backtracking the previous day's trek, but moving well beyond what they would cover tomorrow. Uldyssian noted important points along the journey ahead that he hoped to recall well enough to pass on to his followers, while at the same time seeing how if the edyrem had made certain changes, they could have covered more distance earlier.

He saw creatures of the forest, night dwellers now uncovered by the golden illumination. Yet, they neither sensed his approach nor even knew that they were no longer cloaked. Some he had never seen before, and their exotic nature fascinated the son of Diomedes despite the present circumstances.

But even after what was the most meticulous hunt imaginable...Uldyssian discovered no trace of Mendeln.

Finally, despite the headiness of their success, he could stand it no more. Uldyssian felt Serenthia's surprise when he began to withdraw to the camp. The scenery flashed by and although Uldyssian continued to watch and study, yet again he discovered no clue.

And then...the former farmer once more sat across from his companion. Uldyssian did not know when he had opened his eyes, but

both he and Serenthia sat staring at one another as if having done so for hours. Very reluctantly, he disengaged one hand in order to rub his brow. She did the same.

"I'm sorry," Serenthia finally said. "I thought we'd find Mendeln for certain."

"So did I." However, despite that terrible failure, Uldyssian was not altogether sad. It was not only because he and Serenthia had discovered a new, fascinating ability...but also because they had been drawn together as no two people surely ever had. One glance at her face was enough to tell him that she felt much the same.

Uldyssian immediately shook his head, angry at himself for becoming distracted by such things when his brother was in terrible danger. The attempt, however successful in itself, had failed. That was *all* that mattered.

Serenthia leaned forward. "Uldyssian—"

He wanted to stay with her, but knew that to do so would keep his mind from fully focusing on Mendeln. With an abruptness that made Serenthia gasp, Uldyssian jumped to his feet and left.

He regretted the action almost immediately, but did not even consider turning back. Uldyssian dared not let himself become distracted again. Only Mendeln mattered...providing it was not *already* too late.

That thought made him shiver anew. Mendeln *gone*. First Achilios, now this.

Uldyssian looked up to the dark, shrouded sky, raising a fist at the same time. He wanted to shout, but aware how that would stir up the others anew, forced his voice down to a virulent hiss.

"Damn you, Lilith! Damn you for beginning all this!"

The jungle remained silent, but somehow Uldyssian was certain that she heard his bitter oath...heard it and laughed merrily.

"Don't...give up...hope..."

The voice was barely a whisper, yet it pierced the fog in his brain. Uldyssian turned about, seeking the speaker...and finding no one.

Brow furrowed, he stared at the emptiness for several seconds, then grimaced. Now, on top of matters, he was imagining voices...or rather, one voice in particular.

Achilios's.

"Damn you, Lilith..." Uldyssian repeated, seeing in his mind both his brother and the dead archer. "If Mendeln's gone, too..."

But he had no threat against her in which, at the moment, even *he* believed.

Eight

They remained in the area the next day...and the next after that. Uldyssian did not sleep once, fearing that any respite would lessen his chances of finding Mendeln. The longer his brother remained missing, the longer the odds that Mendeln was still alive.

Saron and Romus, accompanied by Tomo and a small mix of other Parthans and Torajians, finally dared approach him late on the succeeding day. They found Uldyssian where he often was, standing at the edge of the camp with eyes shut and hands curled into fists. Around him, noticeable only to the eyes of edyrem, glowed a silver aura.

The aura vanished before either of the first two could summon the courage to speak. Uldyssian turned to face the group.

"Tomorrow..." he muttered. "If nothing by then...I promise it'll be tomorrow."

Saron, thin and wiry, bowed low. "Master Uldyssian, it is not that we wish to abandon your brother...if Tomo, who is like a brother to me, were missing, I would search just as you do, but—"

"But searching the same ground over and over and over is futile. I understand, Saron. I can't risk everyone else by forcing them to wait here." He looked among those who had come, both men and women. These were many of his most promising, with enough control now to be a threat to the majority of human foes. Even perhaps a morlu or a lesser demon. Yet, they were lost without him.

"Tomorrow," he repeated, starting to turn back to the jungle. "Thank you for understanding."

The Parthans nodded while most of Saron's people bowed. As they trudged off, Uldyssian refocused his efforts. There *had* to be somewhere or something that he had missed. Some clue that whatever had taken Mendeln had left behind.

But continually he came up empty-handed. Finally, as the sun set, Uldyssian retired to eat. He did not even notice of what his meal consisted, his attention entirely on seeking some new course of action.

Belatedly, Uldyssian noticed that Serenthia sat across from him. Since his wordless departure from her, they had stood apart. He knew that she would have liked to have been with him, even comforted him, and the fact that he felt the same ripped at his heart. Yet, for more than one reason, the son of Diomedes refused to give in to such

things.

He went back to searching as soon as his food was gone. Taking his cue from the effort he and Serenthia had put in together, Uldyssian let his mind reach out far beyond what his eyes could see. Alone, he could not survey the jungle in quite so dramatic a fashion as the two of them had, but still Uldyssian felt certain that he covered the areas that he studied as thoroughly as possible.

But *still* he did not find even so much as a hint of what had happened.

In the end, there remained only one other hope, something that he had not wanted to attempt for it endangered not only him. However, it was the single possibility that Uldyssian thought at all yet likely.

And so, stretching himself to his limits, he reached out to the distant ruins...and that which lurked among them.

The effort proved not quite the strain Uldyssian had believed it would be. He could only assume that perhaps his efforts with Serenthia had further unfettered the potential of his abilities. Uldyssian marveled at this, even as his thoughts propelled him within range of the demonic presence's ancient abode.

But once there, Uldyssian immediately noticed the lack of any sign of Mendeln. More curious, he also noticed how faint the *specter's* trace was, so much so that at first he could not even sense it. If the presence was the source of his brother's disappearance, surely Mendeln could have easily fought back against such paltry power.

Nonetheless, Uldyssian continued to probe the ruins. As he did, he finally sensed the presence stir somewhat...but without radiating any of the violent emotion from the first encounter. In fact, it was almost as if the demon now wished to *relay* something to him.

To enable it to do that, though, would require Uldyssian to let down some of his guard. He studied his adversary as best he could, sensing only weakness...and urgency. There was no hint of threat. At last, desperate to find some clue, however remote, Uldyssian relented.

But as he began to open himself up, someone suddenly shook his physical form. Immediately, the ruins—and their malevolent inhabitant—receded into the dark...and Uldyssian found himself once more poised at the edge of the camp.

Serenthia stood beside him, her eyes wide with fear. "Uldyssian! Are you mad? I nearly didn't break the link between you in time!"

"I finally had some hope!" he snapped back, registering what she had done. "A clue to Mendeln—"

"Not from *that* evil thing! Think! Why would it tell you anything to help you? *Why?*"

He started to reply, then hesitated. Uldyssian had no good

explanation and the more he thought about it, the more he knew that Serenthia's point had much merit. Why *would* the creature do anything to assist in the hunt? In his desperation, it was very likely that all Uldyssian had been doing was giving the demonic presence a chance for vengeance against him.

And, after that, surely it would have once more tried for Serenthia...

Running his fingers through his hair, he muttered, "You're right. Damn it, you're right, Serenthia..."

"I'm sorry. Really I am." She looked deep into his eyes. "You've done everything for Mendeln that you could...that anyone could. What more is there?"

Again, Uldyssian had no good answer.

"You're tired," the merchant's daughter continued. "You need rest."

He nodded. Suddenly, it was all Uldyssian could do just to stand. Even he had to admit that nothing good would come of attempting any more searches today.

"I promised the others that we'd leave tomorrow," he informed her. "Tell them that we'll do so at first light."

"I should stay with you—"

"No. Please tell them, Serenthia." With that, Uldyssian purposely retreated to a spot near the closest of the fires and immediately laid down. He eyed the flames, noticing belatedly that Serenthia still watched him. Finally, her expression masked, she walked away to do as he had requested.

Uldyssian shut his eyes. Even though he was so very tired and had agreed to get rest, he knew that he would not sleep. How could he? His brother was very likely dead. Uldyssian already knew that he would spend the entire night going over every search for the hundredth time, seeking some error he had made. Over and over he would analyze *everything* that he had done—

A soft hand on Uldyssian's shoulder gently shook him awake. He stiffened and a grin started to cross his face, for he had just been dreaming that Mendeln had returned unharmed. However, glancing up, his smile faltered, for he saw that it was Serenthia awakening him...and that above her, light had begun filtering through the foliage.

"I had them let you sleep as long as possible," she quietly told him. "The others are nearly ready to depart."

An intense feeling of guilt washed over him, as if he had somehow betrayed his brother by actually sleeping. "You should've woken me

much sooner!" Uldyssian blurted, his anger unreasonable even to himself. After all, the woman leaning over him was almost as concerned about Mendeln as he was. "I need to do one more search! I think that this time I can find—"

His companion frowned sadly. "If I thought you had any chance at all, Uldyssian, I'd be there at your side. You know that. I can see it in your face, though. You don't have any new idea, do you? You just want to search and search, isn't that right? Search until you find him..."

"Yes...no...but..."

"You've done all you could for Mendeln...just as you did for Achilios. We *have* to move on, even if I don't want to any more than you. For the sake of all the rest...and you, too...there's no other choice. Mendeln would be the first one to tell you that. You know he would."

There was nothing more he could say. Uldyssian rose, took one look at the jungle, and then summoned Tomo to him.

"Can we make it to Hashir in four more days?"

"If we walk long and hard, Master Uldyssian. I would prefer to say five, if you please."

"We make it in four."

Tomo bowed. "Yes, Master Uldyssian."

"We make it in four and we lose no one else along the way. I want that understood." The son of Diomedes fought to keep his tone even. "No one else."

"Yes, Master Uldyssian."

Uldyssian looked at Serenthia. She gave him a determined smile and repeated his oath. "No one else."

With her at his side and Tomo in his wake, he marched to the head of the already waiting throng. Tomo rushed to Romus and Saron, whispering animatedly to the pair. What Uldyssian had demanded would quickly spread to the rest, just as he wanted.

Once in the lead, Uldyssian nodded back at his followers, then continued on. Silently, the edyrem flowed after.

They made great distance that day, driven for the most part by Uldyssian's determination to now get as far away as he could from where his brother had vanished. By the end of the trek, even he felt every muscle scream. Guilt at how some of the others, especially the women and children, had probably suffered made him promise to the weary group that the next day would go much easier.

But it did not. Barely had they begun their trek when a storm swept

across the jungle, a violent storm that forced Uldyssian to finally call a halt.

"It looks to last the whole day!" shouted Romus, shielding his eyes from debris torn up by the wind. The rain coursed down like a thousand battering rams, forcing people to take what shelter they could. Those with a better sense of their abilities created invisible barriers above themselves and others, but the longer and harder the rain fell, the more those weakened or dissipated entirely.

"Keep everyone together!" Uldyssian cursed the storm, certain somehow that it was working in league with Lilith and the Triune.

Serenthia struggled to hold on to his arm. "Something must be done about it! *You* must do something about it!"

Her words brought back undesired recollections. Lilith—as Lylia—had at one time suggested much the same thing. Then, it had concerned the storm clouds over Seram and its surrounding region. That storm had been dispersed, but he had later discovered that it had been more due to the demoness's work than his own.

"No..." Uldyssian growled, not wishing to relive that time in any way. "No...I can't..."

A nearby tree creaked ominously. Leaves and jagged branches flew through the air. A woman screamed as a terrible gust tossed her back into her companions. Children cried. Despite all that they had been given, despite all that they had learned, even the most talented of the edyrem began to give in to their fears and exhaustion.

Uldyssian knew that he *should* attempt something, even if only to remind the others of what they were capable. The band was not long from Hashir. They had to be ready to face what might be a more terrible foe despite the temple's smaller size, for surely Hashir would be forewarned.

Yet, his will was weak, worn as it still was by Mendeln's loss. He shook his head, fighting with himself—

Without warning, Serenthia let go of him. Uldyssian grabbed for her but missed. To his surprise, she stepped into the most open area around them, where the storm threatened worst. Although already drenched to the skin, Cyrus's daughter stood proud and tall. She held high the spear, brandishing it at the sinister black clouds.

"Away with you!" Serenthia shouted at the top of her lungs at the dark sky. "Away!"

Seeing her there, doing futilely what he might actually be able to accomplish, filled Uldyssian with incredible remorse. Mendeln would not have wanted him acting this way because of him. If there was any hope that Uldyssian could stop this raging tempest, then it behooved him at the very least to make the attempt—

But that thought died as something incredible unfolded. Like some warrior goddess, Serenthia continued to not only defy the elements, but demanded that they bow to her. She waved the spear as if ready to toss it into the heart of the storm...

And then...and then the rain slowed, finally *ceasing* altogether. The wind died down to a mere whisper. The black clouds faded to gray and then began to disperse.

The others—Uldyssian included—stood awestruck by this miracle. An aura surrounded Serenthia, a brilliant golden aura. Yet, she stood as if unnoticing of this or any of the other phenomena. Instead, she continued to demand obedience from the sky...and received it.

The last of the clouds melted away. A hush settled over the dense jungle, not even the multitude of insects usually present letting out so much as a single sound.

Arms dropping to her sides, Serenthia let out a gasp. Her body shook and the spear dropped from her grip. At the same time, the aura disappeared.

Slowly, very slowly, Serenthia looked over her shoulder at Uldyssian. Her face stone white, her breathing rapid, she managed to blurt, "I...did it...didn't I?"

He nodded, feeling both shame and exhilaration. Serenthia had done what he *should* have instinctively chosen to do. In the process, she had revealed a level of power that only he had so far exhibited. She should not have had to put herself through so much...but the fact that she had just proven what Uldyssian had always preached finally stirred him to life.

"Yes...you did it," he said proudly and so loud that all those around them could hear. "You did what *any* of us are capable of!" He faced the edyrem. "And I, who claim so much, offer my deepest apologies that I did nothing—*nothing*—at all..."

But Serenthia was the first of many to protest his failure. No one said why they bothered to defend him, but to Uldyssian it obviously had to do with Mendeln. He felt grateful for the care and support and swore that he would not let himself fall again, if only for *their* sake.

Still, he could not feel but thrilled by Serenthia's triumph and advancement. There had always been a hint of disbelief among his followers whenever Uldyssian had insisted that he was no more mighty than any of them. Now, even the least among the Parthans and Torajians knew that they could achieve so much more. Even Serenthia, for all that she had done this day, had not yet reached his level.

"The storm is gone!" Uldyssian shouted. "And, in honor of that, it'll be you, Serenthia, who gives command for the rest of us to continue

the march! You!”

A wide smile spread across her still wet countenance. Serenthia plucked the spear from the ground, then pointed in the direction of their goal.

“Onward to Hashir!” she called with gusto.

A cheer erupted from the others. Serenthia looked Uldyssian’s way once more. He nodded, indicating with his chin that she should begin the trek. If anything, her smile grew wider yet. Shoulders proud, she started walking.

After giving her a few paces, Uldyssian followed. Romus and the other edyrem joined after. The mood of the makeshift army rose to new levels. Uldyssian sensed their confidence; here was now the force that had taken Toraja’s temple and would do the same to Hashir. Here was the beginning of something that the Triune would now truly fear. Here was something, he started to believe, that even *Lilith* would be unprepared to face.

And perhaps...perhaps...here was something that somehow might help him yet find Mendeln...

Arihan had not lived half as long as his late counterpart, Malic—who himself had supposedly had not one, but more than *two* lifetimes granted him by the master—but he looked almost old enough to have been the dead high priest’s father. Arihan, who had once been a thief, a liar, a cutpurse, and a murderer—and now used those skills more often as high priest of Dialon—did not believe in the vanities that Malic, partly Ascenian by birth, had so often displayed. Malic had been a peacock, wearing not only fine clothes but maintaining a face and form not truly his for many, many decades.

Born of low caste in the deep recesses of the capital, the gaunt, thick-bearded Arihan had expected that one day the lead cleric of Mefis would, in his arrogance, overstep himself. That prediction had recently come to pass, but Arihan wisely kept his glee hidden from the others. It was one thing to maneuver for position in the hierarchy, another to be pleased with a failure that affected the Triune even more than it had the fool who had perished because of it. This Uldyssian ul-Diomed was of significance to the sect’s ultimate objectives and Malic’s tremendous debacle had ruined any chance of ever seducing the peasant to the cause. Now, a more harsh course of action would need to be taken.

Arihan had been ready to offer his services in pursuing the matter immediately after Malic’s demise, but something strange had happened that had caused him to hesitate. The Primus, ever predictable in his perfection, of late acted as if not quite himself. He

had grown very reclusive and subject to lengthy, inexplicable absences. More confusing, he gave commands to his followers that seemed just as likely to create havoc among the priests as they did to better enable them to coordinate their efforts.

Yes, there was something amiss...but Arihan had no idea how best to approach that difficulty. He certainly was not about to register his concerns with either of his counterparts, especially Malic's novice—but highly ambitious—replacement. If only—

A particularly ugly Peace Warder suddenly stood in the high priest's path. So caught up in his thoughts, Arihan nearly collided with the dolt.

The Peace Warder was obviously mad, for he seemed unconcerned about his transgression. "The Lord Primus wishes to speak with you, High Priest Arihan. Immediately."

"Where is he?" the bearded elder asked, his monotone voice belying his sudden anxiety.

"Awaiting you in his chambers, venerable one."

Arihan gave the man a dismissive nod and strode down the long marble hallway at a pace that indicated confidence but not disrespect. He passed several more Peace Warders standing at attention along the way, the guards as resolute as statues. For some reason, that stirred his concerns more.

The sentries at the doors to the Primus's inner sanctum gave way without any preamble, which made the robed figure feel as if he was already late. The Primus did not like tardiness; Arihan recalled at least one incident when such a sin had left the sinner bereft of his beating heart.

All was darkness as he entered the chambers. The doors slammed shut behind him with a harsh finality. Arihan blinked, trying to accustom his eyes to the black rooms. He knew in which he would find his master, but what was the reason for having no light whatsoever along the path? Generally, there was at least an oil lamp or dim torch.

The priest took a step forward...and something about the size of a cat scurried over his sandaled foot.

Arihan let out an uncharacteristic yelp, which only served to add to his tensions. How did it look for the high priest of Dialon—or rather, *Diablo*—to be startled by something so small and unseen? He served the master of terror! Arihan hoped and prayed that something had distracted the Primus's attention at that moment...

He could now see just enough to wend his way to the innermost chamber. It occurred to him that perhaps he could have conjured a light, but the Primus wanted darkness for a reason, whatever that

might be.

As Arihan reached the doorway to his master's sanctum, it opened by itself. A dim, unearthly illumination greeted him. Arihan glanced down at his narrow hands, which were now the green of decay.

"Enter, enter, High Priest Arihan!" the Primus called, his voice oddly excited.

Doing as commanded, Arihan stepped toward the throne. As he neared, he saw the Primus, a giant, bearded man both younger and older in appearance than him, study the newcomer with a strange fascination. Again, Arihan wondered about the recent changes in the personality of the figure before him. He had always known what to expect...but not this time.

As was custom, the priest went down on one knee just before his master's feet. He knew that the Primus was indeed the scion of Lord Mephisto, but always thought of him by his mortal title, not his name.

Never as Lucion.

"Great and powerful Primus, son of the most regal Mephisto, your loyal attendant, Arihan, is here at your request. How may I serve thee?"

A short, erratic chuckle escaped the vicinity of the Primus. Arihan fought not to look up in surprise at this disconcerting sound. He had *never* heard the master laugh so...so madly.

Almost as quickly as he thought it, the priest smothered the blasphemy. It was not proper to think ill of the Primus, not proper and not wise for one's health.

"Rise! Rise, High Priest Arihan!" the seated figure commanded almost jovially.

Arihan obeyed. He tried to keep his expression and gaze respectful. Perhaps this was a test. Perhaps his master wanted to see how dedicated and loyal Arihan was.

"I am yours to command, most glorious one."

"Yes...yes, you are..." The Primus leaned against one of the armrests of the throne. "This—I am the Voice of the Triune, am I not?"

"But, of course, most glorious one." Arihan felt his brow begin to furrow in concern and perplexity, but fought the action away. He would keep a face of calm adoration, no matter what peculiarity the Primus next exhibited.

Yes, surely this was some sort of test...

The Primus fidgeted. Then, as if aware of how he looked, his aspect grew stern. "High Priest Arihan! Do you have *anything* to say?"

"N-nay, most glorious one! I but await your word on what it is you wish of me!"

“Very good...very good...” A small, black form—a spider, Arihan realized—crawled up out of the Primus’s collar. The leader of the Triune paid no mind to the vermin, even when it began making its way up his neck. “This—I have a plan to bring the mortal to our cause, High Priest Arihan. A masterful plan! But it must be implemented quickly, for it involves our brothers in Hashir.”

“Hashir?” repeated the priest, trying in vain to keep his gaze from shifting to the arachnid. It now crawled on the Primus’s jaw, still apparently undetected.

“Hashir...yes, Hashir will be the perfect place to turn this all around...”

Arihan bowed to the Primus’s wisdom. If he had a plan, then surely it would come to wondrous fruition.

The spider now crawled near the ear, two legs even probing within. Try as he might, the high priest of Dialon could not help but stare at it.

Spiders...there was something about spiders that Arihan had once known. What was it—?

With astonishing reflexes, the figure on the throne suddenly snatched the arachnid up. The Primus clenched his hand, crushing the creature within.

“There is something wrong, my Arihan?”

It was the first time since the gaunt man had entered that his master had not used his title. Although unsettled, Arihan managed to shake his head.

“So good...so good...” The hand remained clenched. The Primus smiled wide...something he had never done before. “You are to be my agent! This is what you will do that will bring the human Uldyssian to our side...whether he wishes to come or not.”

Arihan bowed his head and listened as the Primus outlined his intentions. He listened and all thought of the master’s recent quirks were quickly buried deep in his mind. After all, Arihan lived to serve the Primus; in the end, that was all that mattered.

That...and the knowledge that even if there might now be a hint of madness in the son of Mephisto, the Primus could still *crush* Arihan as simply as he had the spider.

Nine

Darkness surrounded Mendeln, darkness that felt as if it went on forever. Uldyssian's brother suspected that if he ran and ran as hard as he could for as long as possible, he would find no change in things. It would still be dark and empty. A part of him was unnerved by that... but another part was morbidly fascinated.

Still, his concerns for Uldyssian overrode that fascination and the longer Mendeln stood alone and silent in the darkness, the more impatient he became to return...if such a thing was possible. He was, after all, very likely a prisoner.

Why this betrayal, Achilios? he asked himself. *Why steal me away when I only wanted to reunite you with the others? What reason could you have for stopping me?*

"Because what you would have done would have had very unfortunate repercussions," replied the voice he knew so well from his own mind.

A shape emerged from the darkness, a shape that yet still seemed very much a part of it. The tall, very pale man with the features too perfect. The cowed figure stood a full head higher than Mendeln, something the younger son of Diomedes had not earlier noticed.

"What repercussions? What? Speak some sense! What repercussions?"

But instead of answering those questions, the other turned from him and looked up...not that Mendeln saw anything different when he, too, stared in that direction. There was simply more of the darkness.

The stranger—no, he had called himself *Rathma*—quietly asked the emptiness, "Well? Can you sense what she is about?"

And the emptiness *answered*.

No...she is well shielded in this regard. There is perhaps only one who knows best how to infiltrate that shield and learn the truth...

Rathma frowned. "And we cannot exactly expect my father to be of assistance...as he is more likely than even her to try to reduce me to dust."

There is that small matter...

Mendeln's head throbbed each time the second voice spoke, as if his mind was not strong enough to fully accept its presence. He clutched his temples, trying to regain his balance.

*Forgive me...*the voice said, its intensity much reduced. *I will endeavor to keep within your bounds...*

Rathma helped Mendeln straighten. "The first time he spoke to me, I thought my head would split open."

"Did not mine do so?" Mendeln blinked, again seeking the source of the voice. "Who is it who speaks to us? I have heard him before, too!" To the darkness, he suddenly railed, "Show yourself! I'd know *all* my captors!"

"But we are not your captors," Rathma quietly returned. "Hardly that. Nor, definitely, your enemies."

"Not my friends, to be sure! Or else why take me from Uldyssian's side, where I should always be?"

Because, if you wish to be there for him when you most need to be, you must be with us now...

"More riddles? Who are you, speaker in the shadows? Cease hiding from me!"

Rathma tsked. "There can be no going on with explanations until he sees you, my friend," he said to the emptiness. "But recall that he is mortal."

He is not so much less than you, Rathma...

"I never said otherwise."

Listening to the pair, Mendeln sensed how long they had clearly known one another. There was a bond here as great as that between him and Uldyssian...

*Know me, then, Mendeln ul-Diomed...*the voice declared, keeping its intensity to a low booming in his head. *Know me as Rathma here does...*

And suddenly there were stars in the darkness above, a blazing multitude of stars that swirled about as if caught up in a tempest. They filled the area above to the point that Mendeln had to shield his eyes. At first there seemed no rhyme or reason to their movements, but quickly they began to spread apart and settle into certain areas. As they did, Mendeln noticed that a shape began to form, a shape only half-seen, yet seen enough to finally identify it.

It was a creature of myth, a thing in fairy tales and stories, but never truth. Uldyssian had cheerfully frightened Mendeln with tales of such when the latter had been a small child...and Mendeln had savored every story.

But now...now to see such a giant, especially one composed of *stars*...Mendeln stood gaping and speechless.

It was a *dragon*. A long, sinewy, serpentine dragon *beyond* epic proportions.

*The dragon has chosen you...*those words or ones very close to them

had been etched on the stone in the ghastly cemetery Mendeln had found himself in while staying in Partha. *The dragon has chosen you...*

The celestial creature shifted, its “eyes” a startling array of smaller stars. *Know me...* it repeated. *Know me as Trag’Oul...*

“The One Who Is Forever,” added Rathma, almost blandly despite the astounding spectacle. “At least, that is one meaning. There are several.”

But Mendeln barely heard that, for as the dragon spoke, he constantly shifted...and in doing so, revealed a more stunning facet. Within each of the “scales”—the stars—Uldyssian’s brother beheld short glimpses of life...*his life*. There he was as an infant, in his mother’s arms. Mendeln cried out at the sight of her, the pain of her loss—of his entire family’s loss—suddenly renewed.

He forced himself to look beyond that moment and thus witnessed one scene after another as the years of his pitiful little mortal existence raced along in what was for Trag’Oul surely the blink of an eye.

Trying to shake free of his feelings of insignificance, Mendeln beheld the fantastic entity as a whole...and in doing so noticed that not only was his life displayed before him, but so were hundreds, no thousands more.

We are all there, Mendeln realized. *All of Humanity, from the first on...each scale...each scale is a measure of some part of us...*

And among those lives, his eyes somehow fixed upon Uldyssian. In fact, the images of the brothers intertwined constantly, which made sense, of course. Whether together or alone, they were bonded by more than simply blood.

Yet...as the years of their lives swiftly progressed down the “body” of the giant, the two lives grew more separate. Mendeln saw the discovery of the stone near Seram and his brother’s seduction by Lilith as Lylia. The images flashed faster and faster. Partha. Lucion. Achilios’s death. Toraja. Serenthia. And on and on until—

Trag’Oul shifted again and the lives of the sons of Diomedes became lost among the sea of other existences. The human let out another cry and stared at what passed for the face of the dragon.

No more should you perceive, Trag’Oul told him. *For beyond that is the realm of possibilities, where what you see are the paths that choices not yet made determine. It would be a danger to yourself and to this world to try to choose from them before life has assisted you in the decision...*

He was speaking of the *future*. The dragon not only reflected the past and present, but what could be. The incredible immensity of the being stretched above him only now struck Mendeln. He sensed that Trag’Oul only revealed to him—and even Rathma—a most minor

portion of himself. Turning to the cowed figure, Mendeln blurted, "What—?"

"What is 'he,' you want to ask?" Rathma gestured at the ever-shifting form. "Even Trag'Oul does not entirely know. He has existed since just after the beginning of creation, although not quite as we sense him now."

No...that came later...Whenever the dragon spoke, the scales flowed and shifted, constantly displaying other lives, other times. That came with the finding of the Shards...with the molding of Sanctuary by the renegade angels and demons...

Mendeln had no idea what the leviathan was talking about save that it had mentioned demons. He glared at Rathma, whose features had, for the past few moments, greatly reminded him of another...too much of another, in fact.

And then it struck Mendeln like a bolt through his heart. He knew exactly who it was.

"You and she!" Uldyssian's brother grated, anger exploding. He pointed a condemning finger at the figure, who stood as motionless as death. "You and she! I can see it in you! You are *hers*! Hers!"

Mendeln summoned words of power, words that he was well aware he had gained from the very one he sought to attack.

Rathma raised a hand. In it materialized the ivory dagger that Mendeln had seen before his kidnapping. As the last of the words escaped Mendeln's lips, the dagger flared bright.

So near the unnatural illumination and with his eyes now accustomed to the darkness, Mendeln was instantly blinded. He let out a cry and stumbled back.

He has adapted to your teachings well, Rathma...

"Almost too well. I was nearly too late. But his mind...his spirit...are not yet utterly in tune with the Balance."

Discovering yourself before the offspring of Lilith can be rather disconcerting. You must consider emotions, Rathma. Sometimes I believe you have taken my teachings too much to heart, my friend...

Mendeln paid no mind to their discourse, his only concern recovering his sight. He continued stumbling back, somehow hoping to escape the demon before him.

"I am no demon...at least not in the full sense, Mendeln ul-Diomed," Rathma declared, again seeming to read his thoughts.

"Get out of my head!"

The cloaked figure began to coalesce before Uldyssian's brother. "We are beyond that, my student. You proved yourself receptive to what I offered that day when you were shown the stone near your village, the stone that was the first of your tests."

“Tests for what? To see if I would become servant to a demon?”

Above, the stars abruptly shifted. Looking up, Mendeln thought that the face of Trag’Oul seemed almost...reproving. *You are much too absolute at times, Rathma. Explain more. Tell him of his bloodline. Tell him about Lilith...*

“I was going to.” For the first time, there was a hint of emotion—irritation?—in the cloaked figure’s tone. “You know I was.”

Eventually... More reshaping of the stars, more displaying of different lives. Never the same ones. *Always eventually...*

Rathma suddenly sighed. “Yes, perhaps I do hesitate, despite what I have said about the need for haste.” To Uldyssian’s brother, he calmly explained, “Mendeln, son of Diomedes, who himself was son of Teronus, who was the son of Hedassyian...I tell you now that you are of my *own* blood, my own offspring...and, thus, in turn, the one you know as Lilith...”

And Inarius, too, recall...

“He will know of Inarius soon enough.” Rathma watched Mendeln closely, the dagger held ready.

But there was neither a renewed attack or even protest from Mendeln. The skills he had gained through Rathma were enough to enable him to gauge the truth of the other’s words. “You do not lie...” rasped Uldyssian’s brother. “You’ve made certain that I would know it!” He shook his head. “Uldyssian and I—we are of *her*?”

“As are so several others, the generations that have passed being of great number. And as I said, you are also of mine,” Rathma pointed out, finally lowering the ivory blade. “Which number far, far less...”

Mendeln sought to put this all together. “Is that why she chose him and you me? Because it was easier to play games with those closest to your infernal blood?”

Irritation once more crossed Rathma’s face, but before he could speak, the stars once more briefly swirled, then re-formed into Trag’Oul. *Peace*, the dragon murmured as best as he could. *If Rathma can be called a demon, so, too, can you and every human. Theirs is where in part all of you come...but also there are the angels to consider...and their role is no less significant in your creation...*

Demons and angels... The notion that he—that everyone—was descended from such sounded so ludicrous. Yet once again the abilities with which Rathma had imbued him made it impossible for Mendeln not to see that all of this was truth.

It all only verified what Lilith herself had revealed in the course of matters. Mendeln had always secretly denied her claims, believing them lies used to undermine Uldyssian’s defiance somehow. *But the only lies involved were to myself, it seems...*

“Very well. You know that I must believe you. What does that matter? I will be your pawn no more than my brother will be hers!”

Rathma let out an exasperated sigh. For him, Mendeln realized, these small slips represented major displays. “We seek no puppets. That is my mother’s way...and my father’s, it appears, also. No, Mendeln ul-Diomed, what we seek is nothing less than any who can stand against what has been destined to come to pass since the very beginning...”

Above, the dragon stirred. In some ways, Trag’Oul was to Mendeln a far more emotional being than the man with whom he trafficked. Therefore, when the leviathan spoke, Mendeln had no trouble sensing the urgency Trag’Oul sought to relay.

Rathma speaks of his father’s folly, the dragon explained. The folly of keeping Sanctuary secret from those beyond. The Burning Hells know already...and thanks to Lilith’s insanity, the High Heavens will also soon discover this realm...

Through Lilith, Uldyssian—and thus, Mendeln—had learned the name given their world by those who had founded it. The demoness had also mentioned something of its earliest, highly turbulent history, too, yet she had never spoken much, as far as he could recall, of what would happen if those from whom the refugees had fled would all come to know of Sanctuary’s existence. He had supposed that not an important point, anymore, but it was obviously a very, very vital one. Indeed, dread spread through Uldyssian’s brother, so much so that he was barely able to blurt out, “And so?”

And so, even if Lilith is foiled and Inarius offers peace...an improbable thing...it is very likely that Sanctuary and all within it—being that which not even the most powerful of either side could have once imagined—will still be destroyed.

“But why?”

There was that in the shifting of Trag’Oul that hinted to Mendeln how disturbed even the great creature was concerning what they discussed. *It is what the demons and angels do whenever they come across a potent potential advantage. They fight over it until they destroy the very thing they desire...a fate, sadly, that is better than becoming the fodder for either...*

“That is why we need you, Mendeln ul-Diomed,” added Rathma, nodding to the mortal. “That is why we truly need you to stand with us...of your own free will, naturally.”

Mendeln swallowed.

Hashir came into sight near noon on the last of the four days that

Uldyssian had demanded of his edyrem. They had crossed the vast jungle with a swiftness that no one before them surely had. So Tomo, Saron, and many of the other Torajians claimed...and Uldyssian had no reason to doubt them.

Distant Hashir, as seen from his vantage point, could be no more than half the size of Toraja, but Uldyssian felt that taking the temple there would require a hundred times the effort. Still, he hoped to avoid unnecessary bloodshed...if that was at all possible at this point.

"I want to enter the city in peace," he told Serenthia and the others. "I want them to see as Toraja did that we mean no harm to those not seeking to harm us. That's essential."

"The Triune knows we're headed this way. They've had time to work on the populace. It could be that the people've been poisoned against us," the merchant's daughter pointed out. "Our greeting might not be so gracious as in Toraja."

Romus and several others nodded. Nevertheless, Uldyssian was steadfast in his decision. "We're not the Triune nor the Cathedral. We show empty hands to Hashir...but fill them if need be."

Uldyssian had the majority of his followers wait in the jungle just out of sight of the first settlements near the city. He chose a party of fifty to come with him, Serenthia and Tomo among them. Romus he left in charge, trusting most in the reformed villain.

As with each time that Uldyssian had shown such faith in him, Romus fell to both knees and took the other man's hands. Touching his forehead to Uldyssian's fingers, the Parthan tearfully said, "Master Uldyssian, I'll not be letting you down. Not ever. By you, I've been saved from myself. That's a greater gift than I've ever been given."

"You've earned what you have." Uldyssian bade the Parthan to rise. "If we're not back by tomorrow morning, you know what must be done."

Romus gritted his teeth and his hands formed fists. "But you'll be coming back, Master Uldyssian! You'll be coming back..."

Uldyssian wished that he felt so confident. The closer that they had gotten to Hashir, the more he had considered leaving Serenthia and everyone else in the jungle and merely walking into the city by himself. Then, if there *was* some plot afoot, at least none of the rest would be caught in it with him.

But Uldyssian knew that Serenthia would never have allowed him to make her stay behind. Nor, for that matter, would the rest of his edyrem have permitted him to go without someone to watch his back. They were as possessive about his safety as he was about theirs regardless of how much stronger Uldyssian was than the whole of them combined.

The whole of them save Serenthia, perhaps. By the time they had reached the vicinity of Hashir, she had become true second in command and her word was nearly as respected as his own. Her counsel had become invaluable to him...just as she herself had.

And that was why, the night before reaching Hashir, he had finally given in to his emotions and hers.

Even Achilios's shade could no longer keep him from her. Their coupling had lasted long, the pent-up fury as much for what had been lost as what was now found. There had been comfort, too, in the familiarity between them, the only familiarity that Uldyssian had left in his life.

She stood at his side as he led the smaller band toward the city gates. Uldyssian had purposely mixed his party half Torajian and half Parthan. The Hashiri, as Tomo said the locals were called, eyed the lighter-skinned members with something approaching awe, many possibly never having seen an "Ascenian" before.

Whether that was true of the guards at the arched gate was not evident, for they stood with wary faces and taut muscles even as the newcomers approached. Other traffic flowed in and out through the gates—wooden carts pulled by oxen, robed pilgrims on foot, and well-dressed merchants on horseback, just a few examples noted in passing by Uldyssian. All got short but studious glances by the sentries as they crossed the threshold. One, a plumed figure who had to be the officer in charge, eyed the foreigners but said nothing until they were next to step into Hashir.

"Do you carry goods for the market?" he asked, even though it should have been obvious that they did not. When Uldyssian answered for everyone with a shake of his head, the officer then peered at the various individuals. "Pilgrims, then. Where is your town, Ascenian?"

"I'm from the village of Seram. Others here are from the town of Partha and the city of Toraja."

The man grunted. "Torajians I can recognize, Ascenian. Partha and Seram...these are places I do not know." He finally shrugged. "Obey all laws and Hashir will always welcome you."

"We thank and respect Hashir for its generosity," Uldyssian returned, having learned the reply from Tomo. Lowlanders, as Uldyssian and the Parthans thought them, always expressed gratitude to a new city upon arrival in it.

His knowledge of the proper response took some of the stoniness out of the guards. The officer waved them past.

Hashir was similar in style to Toraja and from what Uldyssian had learned the former was actually the foundation of the larger city. At some point in the past, Hashir had sent out the explorers who had

built Toraja, named after a hero in lowland epics. Uldyssian found it ironic that Toraja had outgrown its birthplace despite its seemingly remote location.

The tree-lined streets were there, but lacking the small creatures so venerated in Toraja. Instead, a variety of colorful birds appeared to have staked claim to the rich foliage, some of the avians exotic even to Tomo's people.

"The Hashiri are said to bring back whatever beautiful birds they find on journeys, the better to color the skies of their home," the Torajian explained wide-eyed. "I always thought that was bragging of theirs, for Hashir now lives in Toraja's vast shadow...but *such* marvels! See that one?"

Uldyssian had to admit that the birds made for a wonderful, ever-shifting tapestry, but the noise their combined voices made—not to mention the tremendous amount of residue they left in their wake—did not overly enamor him of them. Instead, they made him yearn once more for the soft sounds of the more singular songbirds back home.

Their party continued to gather stares from the Hashiri and among the men Serenthia was a noticeable choice of views. Uldyssian felt a mild jealousy come over him. He managed to quell the desire, but constantly watched in case someone tried to become too familiar.

The Hashiri were dressed very similar to the Torajians, save that many wore silver sashes around their waists, and for the upper castes, nose rings of that very metal. There were other travelers as well, including a few yellow-skinned merchants from east of Kehjan. With their narrow eyes and unreadable expressions, they seemed almost feline. The Parthans among his group were especially fascinated by them, not that the Torajians did not also express interest.

The jungle lion was the patron symbol of Hashir; stylized versions perched atop many a column or gateway. The artisans had given the lion a savage grin that reminded Uldyssian too much of a demon, even though the stone creatures were supposed to be guardians against such.

Then there came into sight that which made all else in Hashir fade from Uldyssian's mind.

Above the rounded buildings ahead loomed the familiar triple towers of the Triune.

Uldyssian wanted to go directly there, but striking at the temple would only alienate the citizenry against him, who, so far, appeared not to have been warned against them. The last meant that what had worked in Toraja could still work here after all.

The market was an oval region situated at the main thoroughfare in

the city. Twin fountains set on opposing ends bubbled enthusiastically. Tents and carts filled the vicinity, their exotic wares even briefly taking some of Uldyssian's attention from the temple.

He finally spotted that for which he had been searching. In the center of the market was a raised stone platform used for public gatherings and where even now would-be prophets preached to any who would listen. Most had audiences numbering only in the handfuls, if that much.

"On the right," he told the others. "That'll be our spot." Even some of the ragged speakers paused as he neared, although Uldyssian was certain that it was due to his pale appearance, nothing more. He nodded politely at one, who rewarded him with a sneer.

The edyrem took up positions that Uldyssian had arranged in advance. A few, such as Serenthia, stood with him, while the rest became his initial audience. Uldyssian had learned the last part from Toraja, where some of the preachers there had secretly supplied their own cohorts as "converts," the better to attract others wondering what drew the "crowd." He did not consider his choice having anything to do with fakery; the edyrem, after all, were true believers who had joined him because of his previous speeches.

One or two locals drifted close even before he could clear his throat, no doubt merely interested in his foreignness. That suited Uldyssian fine. Tomo and his cousin had done the same in their city, as had others.

"My name is Uldyssian," he began, his voice amplified by his powers. From every direction, heads turned toward him. Uldyssian kept his voice even and friendly—one man to another. In his case, he knew it was more him than his speechmaking that would attract people. "And I ask only that you listen for a moment."

A few more Hashiri trickled toward him. The edyrem in the audience subtly shifted positions, enabling the locals to better view Uldyssian. As more and more newcomers added themselves, his followers pulled back. They would speak to the listeners only if asked questions. Uldyssian wanted his presence alone to be the reason anyone chose to gain the gift.

He started to tell them about his simple life and how he had been no greater a man than any of them. Even before Uldyssian reached the part where he had discovered his powers—leaving out the detail of Lilith—those listening numbered more than his party, with others constantly streaming toward the area. Serenthia glanced at him, her smile giving him more confidence. Hashir started to promise to be like Partha, a place full of acceptance, not fear and hate.

Not like his lost Seram.

The crowd in the market was now mainly his. Uldyssian gazed out at the faces, many of them clearly ready to learn of the gifts within themselves. Giving the throng a cursory search, he also detected no enmity, no treachery. He had expected there to be at least one servant of the Triune among his listeners, but could find none. Perhaps, he thought, they had holed themselves up in the temple, preparing for battle.

If so, they would find it coming soon enough.

Nearly every other activity in the market had ceased. The rest of those preaching had long fallen silent and at least one stood among Uldyssian's audience, his expression as rapt as several of the others.

As he neared the conclusion of his speech, Uldyssian created a glow light. Gasps arose from the crowd. He dispersed the light, but the point had been made. What he spoke of was not mere fantasy nor trickery. Magic, yes, but one that he now pointed out was possible for anyone there, if only they would see.

The city guards who had been patrolling the market when first he had arrived now stood at the outer edges. They watched the proceedings with what were supposed to be disinterested faces, but Uldyssian noted a couple who seemed caught up in his words. The others merely did their duties and he saw no threat from them. Uldyssian continued to keep watch out for the Triune, but they remained absent.

At last, he finished, offering, as he always did, to show any who desired what their potential might be. As expected, there was a moment of hesitation and then the first brave soul—a young woman whose face was half-concealed by a veil—stepped forward. Uldyssian repeated the same steps he had with his converts in Partha and Toraja and was not at all surprised when the woman gasped with delight and immediate understanding.

Her reaction caused a sudden flow forward by most in the front of the throng. The edyrem standing with Uldyssian moved to create some sort of order. Even then, he faced a sudden sea of outstretched hands, each supplicant wanting to be next.

They all imagine it differently, Uldyssian thought as he chose one. *But they all see it the same once it's been awoken. No one looks at it as if it were a way to take advantage of others.* He had wondered about that more than once. Was it because *he* was the messenger? If it had been someone like Malic, would the edyrem now be a force willingly embracing the evil of the temple?

Uldyssian could not believe that. As he greeted the man before him, he sensed nothing evil. Surely, the gifts could never be tainted.

But then, Lilith, Malic, and Lucion had all thought otherwise...

The crowd continued to swell. It was suddenly all Uldyssian could do to concentrate on his efforts. People were clearly spreading the word, for there were more in front of him than there had been in all the market at the beginning. Not even Partha had shown such eagerness. There, it had taken the healing of a child. In Toraja, it had needed more. But with Hashiri, it was almost as if the populace had expected his coming.

Uldyssian choked back any sign of his dismay. He quickly searched the crowd again, something that, with so many potential converts with which to deal, he had ceased doing.

He found them immediately. They were mixed into the crowd, especially among the later arrivals. They had waited for his concentration to be pushed to the brink before joining.

Peace Warders.

Without their uniforms to mark them, they were as any of the rest in the crowd. Once again, Uldyssian had grown overconfident. He had dared the Triune to act and they had obliged him.

But getting assassins close and enabling them to succeed were two different matters. Uldyssian easily picked out the foremost three. However, when he probed for weapons, Uldyssian found none. Did they hope to strangle him? Why send unarmed men against him, who could easily strike them down?

Or could he? Doing so would make it appear that he was attacking simple pilgrims. He noted two more behind the three. Five men and still their purpose was unclear. They pushed as hard as possible to reach him, even though they had to assume that he now kept an eye on each. What was the Triune hoping to achieve?

And suddenly, he knew.

Uldyssian pulled back from the eager supplicants. Even as he turned, with his mind he sought out Serenthia.

She was there, but not alone. Two figures, a small girl and an elderly man, held hands with her. Likely, Serenthia had sought to bring them to him. However, her expression—mostly puzzlement—indicated that she was just becoming aware of something amiss.

To his own heightened senses, there was *very* much wrong. He could see them for what they were even though they wore the semblances of others and seemed impossibly small and weak in comparison to their true, foul selves.

Morlu.

Uldyssian reached out for Serenthia, his power simultaneously rising up to strike the disguised creatures.

But in the next second, the morlu vanished...and with them, Serenthia.

Ten

Not again! Not again!

Those two words repeated themselves over and over in Uldyssian's head. First Achilios, then Mendeln, and now, Serenthia. One by one, those nearest to him had been lost. It in no way eased his pain that he now suspected what had happened to his brother. Surely the morlu, using some spell, had materialized around Mendeln and stolen him away just as they had done to Serenthia.

But *what* had happened did not matter. Only somehow trying to save Serenthia. The temple had plotted well; most did not even notice that she was missing. The edyrem were all too busy trying to maintain some order without using their powers...a command given to them by Uldyssian. Even they would not have noticed anything amiss around Serenthia.

But now, alerted silently by Uldyssian, they straightened in disbelief. Eyes turned to where the raven-haired woman had stood.

And to Uldyssian's astonishment, Serenthia and her kidnappers *reappeared*.

She stood as if some mystical spirit summoned to the mortal plane. Around her there once again glowed the aura. Her hair flew about, as if caught up in a storm. A grim smile crossed her face.

The glow about her shot without warning toward the figures holding her hands. Hissing escaped both the young girl and the elderly male, an inhuman hissing. In the blink of an eye, their skin *burned* away and as it did, both their shapes and height severely altered...until the two morlu stood revealed before the masses.

"Behold the true face of the servants of the Triune!" Serenthia shouted. "Behold the evil hidden from you all these years!"

The morlu that had been a child shifted one hand behind it, the bestial warrior's reflexes like lightning. The hand came forward again, in it a curved blade as long as Uldyssian's forearm.

But Serenthia merely eyed the hideous creature as he attacked. The blade dissipated to ash as it reached her chest, leaving the dust to blow back in the startled morlu's black eye sockets.

Serenthia let go of the undead warrior...who suddenly flung up and over the crowd as if a leaf caught in a tremendous gust. He rose higher and higher, finally crashing into the roof of a building some distance away.

While this had gone on, the second morlu had remained oddly still. The reason for that Uldyssian knew was again Serenthia. Her aura continued to surround the hapless fiend, who could do nothing as she pulled free his own weapon—and then, with one smooth strike, *beheaded* him.

As the corpse toppled, she looked to Uldyssian. “The Triune has declared itself! They leave no choice! We must move against them immediately!”

He felt her determination mingle with his own. Well aware of the things that the priests might have had in mind for Serenthia, Uldyssian’s anger grew by the second. Still, he swore that he would keep control. Uldyssian wanted no repeat of what had just happened.

“People of Hashir!” he shouted. “This is the truth of the temple! This is—”

His head suddenly filled with what he quickly realized was sinister *whispering*. At the same time, Uldyssian felt a pressure in his skull, as if something sought to squeeze it to pieces. There came unbidden the brief image of a gaunt, bearded man who, despite his elderly appearance, radiated a darkness akin to that of the late, unlamented Malic and was surely another high priest of the Triune.

Summoning his strength, Uldyssian managed to force the pressure away. Far in the temple, Uldyssian sensed the high priest’s consternation.

Serenthia was suddenly at his side. She placed a hand against the back of his head, cradling it. “Uldyssian, my love! What are they doing to you?”

He could not speak, for just then a violent pain coursed through him, so sharp that his heart nearly ceased beating. Vaguely, he registered that Serenthia was still calling to him. Farther away, there were concerned shouts from others.

Shouts...and then *screams*. Despite his own dilemma, Uldyssian yet managed to sense that there were more morlu in the immediate vicinity. He tried to rise, but the pain was too intense. Uldyssian managed at least to look up at Serenthia—only her face looked distorted, out of sync.

His ears filled with more shouts, more screams. At some point, the sky had turned *red*. Uldyssian could make no sense of it—

Then, Serenthia cried out as something dark briefly covered her gaze. She fell back from Uldyssian, who would have tumbled to the stone street if not for another pair of hands seizing him tight.

“I have you,” promised a voice in his ear.

Mendeln’s voice.

Before he could react, the world spun around. The cries and other

sounds receded, as if Uldyssian now heard them from the end of a vast tunnel.

At the very last, he heard Serenthia call his name—and then darkness swallowed him.

Darkness and stars.

Arihan had absolutely no idea what had gone wrong. Everything had been in place and all the servants had known their roles.

Capture the woman, the Primus had commanded. *Capture her and you place a yoke around the male*. Arihan had immediately seen the wisdom of that. One glance through a scrying globe had been enough to reveal just how much the fool cared for his companion. To keep her from harm he would give his soul...exactly what the Triune desired.

But all accounts had indicated the woman far weaker than she had just revealed. In Hashir, she had displayed abilities that even Uldyssian ul-Diomed had not. Arihan would have sworn that she was actually even *more* powerful than the man the sect had been battling. Two morlu had not been enough, even cloaked as they had been by a spell given to him by the Primus.

Through the scrying globe, the priests from Hashir's temple were frantically asking what was going on. They had no idea yet that the plan had turned into an utter disaster for them. The morlu were evidence enough that the Triune had a darker side than it exhibited and with passions as they were at the moment, Arihan foresaw a violent rush upon the temple that would only end with a bloodbath.

A painful noise in his head finally made the high priest return to the globe. A harsh exhalation escaped Arihan when he saw what those in charge of Hashir had now wrought. Some fool had decided that, since *he* had not reacted to the unfortunate turn of events, then they had better do something themselves.

And so the cretins had sent out the rest of their morlu after the peasant and his followers, not thinking how the Hashiri would react to this further revelation of the Triune's true calling.

They are deserving of their fate, the imbeciles! Ignoring any further contact with the priests, Arihan instead surveyed the damage their attempt was causing. Twenty morlu had materialized as if out of thin air among the populace, accompanied by twice that many Peace Warders. However, given orders by those without any good sense, the warriors of the temple were not simply seeking Uldyssian ul-Diomed and his core followers, but anyone near them.

The high priest frowned, noting a sudden absence of one particular subject. Where *was* the peasant leader? Where *was* Uldyssian?

Arihan could certainly see where the woman was. She stood at the center of things, reveling in the carnage and looking as if an angel reborn. A blazing aura continued to surround her and seemed to spread to other followers even as he watched. They began to beat the morlu and Peace Warders down.

Hashir is lost! Lost! The bumbling fools had done it, not Arihan. He had followed the plan to the letter, the perfect plan of his master.

Now...if only the Primus would see it that way...

No sooner had he thought that than Arihan tried to smother the thought.

Too late.

My Arihan...I would see you before me...

The high priest of Dialon stifled a shiver. He had served the Primus well these many years. There might be some pain involved, but the Primus would certainly not waste such a valuable servant.

Arihan rose from the stone floor of the meditation chamber he had usurped for his efforts. He dismissed the scrying globe and doused the oil lamps in the walls with the wave of a hand, then, uncharacteristically, rushed from the room. Now would not be a good time to let the master wait, even for a moment. Let him see that the high priest did not fear to come to him.

The same stolid guards let him pass into the private chambers. Arihan tramped bravely through the darkened outer room, ignoring little sounds around him that he had never noticed in the past. What he could not ignore, however, was a silky material that draped his face just before he reached the inner door.

The high priest spit out what was in his mouth and wiped away the rest. The gauzy material reminded him of a spider's webbing, but that could not be. The Primus had always been very fastidious, even in his torturing. Whatever the filmy substance was, it surely had a logical purpose.

As Arihan wiped the last away, the door opened to admit him. He stepped through immediately.

"My Arihan..." came the Primus's voice. "So good it is that you have come..."

His face a perfect mask, the high priest bowed toward the voice. "Ever I am at your service, most Holy One."

"Ahh, yesss, but how good is that service?" An unsettling green light materialized above the throne, at last revealing the Primus. Although the figure on the throne smiled, there was what Arihan took for strain in the effort.

"All you've asked, I've done," the high priest cautiously returned.

"And where is the female? Is she on her way to me at this very

moment?"

"Nay, my lord. She is lost because of the *fools* in Hashir. They underestimated her. It was no fault of mine that the plan did not succeed, Great One."

The Primus's gaze grew terrible. The smile reversed itself. "And is it mine, then?"

Arihan caught himself. "Of course not! Never could such a thing be! The priests in Hashir were inept in their execution of your grand plot! They misused the morlu and their guards and have brought worse havoc down upon themselves. I fear, most holy lord, that the temple there is lost."

"This one is most, most disappointed, my Arihan." The Primus rose. As he did, the high priest noticed a spider on the wrist of the right hand. It was at least twice as large as the one he had seen on his last visit and *surely* should have been noticeable by his master. "Most disappointed. Assumptions were made. Promises were made..." Arihan's master shivered and looked up. "Promises were made..."

"The female...she was stronger than expected," the priest offered. "At least as strong as the male. That was something no one knew."

Much to his relief, the Primus brightened. "Yesss...that could be useful. He would understand that this could not possibly have been foreseen."

Exactly who this other was of whom he spoke, Arihan did not know, but the Primus's reaction sent a chill through the high priest. There were only three beings that the son of Mephisto would fear...his father and the other two Prime Evils.

To assuage them, even the Primus would need a scapegoat. Arihan suddenly wondered how best he might flee, well aware that his chances of success in that direction were likely nil.

Another spider appeared, this one crawling out of the Primus's collar just as had the one during the previous audience. Arihan belatedly noticed other small and very agitated forms scurrying over the throne...and even over his own feet. What were all these *spiders* doing here and why did his master react with such indifference to them?

"My Arihan..." the figure before him murmured. The Primus reached out to the high priest, who had no choice but to step nearer.

So close, though, Arihan now noticed something wrong with the Primus's eyes. He had seen Lucion's true eyes...and these were not them. In fact, so near, it was possible to tell that each was actually composed of *three or four* separate ones...and all were as crimson as fresh blood.

"Most Holy One," he began, seeking some word that would mean

his salvation. "It is possible that this woman—"

But the Primus shook his head. "No, my Arihan. No. The plot—my glorious plot—should have triumphed! *He* will demand the reason why and she may not be enough—"

"He, 'O Great One?" the human blurted, trying to stall for time. The many spells he knew were unlikely to work here, but Arihan had to attempt *something*. Unfortunately, it was impossible to concentrate for another reason. There were too many spiders, either crawling on the throne, the walls, the Primus—and *himself*, Arihan discovered—or dangling from the ceiling. Some of them were as large as the high priest's hand or even larger.

And at last Arihan recalled what those spiders indicated. He knew what stood before him, disguised as his master. He had never seen the demon, but had, as a young priest, read of him and heard the rumors that the creature dwelled deep in the recesses of the grand temple.

"Our lord *Diablo*, my good Arihan..." the false Primus answered to his question. "He it will be that demands not only a reason why, but the one who failed!" As he spoke, the figure's handsome face began to rip away. Loose threads erupted where the flesh split, threads of silk.

Spiders' threads.

And underneath, was a hairy monstrosity that once Arihan would have gladly summoned, a demon who served the true lord of the high priest's order.

"Great One!" he gasped. "Let me go with you to speak with the wondrous Diablo! Together, we can—"

The robe tore apart as a huge, somewhat manlike shape with eight limbs expanded. Arihan's desperate suggestion was cut off as four clawed hands seized him and pulled his face within inches of a savage pair of mandibles. Saliva dripped on the high priest's immaculate garments.

"Together we shall go, yes, my Arihan, but to present your head on the platter! The head only, yes...for the *rest* of you this one will need for strength when facing the grand and magnificent Diablo!"

The mandibles sank into the high priest's throat, ripping out everything. Arihan had no chance to utter even a gurgle. His head flopped to the side, barely held by some bits of bone and sinew.

Astrogha swallowed the mouthful, then shifted the body to begin sucking out the precious fluids. What the human did not understand was that the demon had actually done him a tremendous favor, killing him so quickly. Lord Diablo might have made him suffer longer, torturing the puny mortal until he was satisfied that he not only knew everything, but had put Arihan through all that entertained the master of terror.

But in the process of that, the high priest might have implicated Astrogha in the failure. Even despite having prevented that scenario, the arachnid would have to do some quick thinking to save himself.

And as he suppressed, one notion already formulated. Lucion was still absent, Lucion who should have noticed what was afoot and come to add his power to the effort. Yes, somehow this would be steered again toward Lucion...and the female with Uldyssian ul-Diomed, also. Arihan had spoken the truth when he had said that she had revealed more than even the demon had expected. She would become the other focus of Astrogha's defense...

At last satiated, he threw the carcass down for the children to finish. Already, Astrogha could sense Diablo awaiting word of his success.

The demon glanced down at the high priest's grotesque corpse, already covered by spiders. "Consider yourself fortunate, my Arihan... consider yourself fortunate...this one may yet envy your fate...yes, envy and plead for it to be so merciful..."

With that, Astrogha opened the way between places, reaching forth into the Burning Hells...

I have awaited you...came the dread voice.

The edyrem looked up as one, sensing the call. It was not from the master, but from she who was closest to him. That was enough. Romus waved his hand and they surged toward Hashir. Even those minding the smallest children followed, for the edyrem did not leave anyone behind. The weakest among them would be better protected staying with the rest, even if that meant following them into a struggle...

And so, there was left only one figure standing in the jungle, one figure who wished with all his might to join the stream of bodies flowing toward the city gates. However, Achilios could not do so, not without creating greater catastrophe.

It's...as they said...she'll take up the reins if he's gone. The archer had not wanted to believe that, but he should have known that Rathma and the dragon were correct. They seemed to be correct about all things.

No...not all. They had been wrong about him. They felt that he would be utterly obedient to what they said. Not because they demanded that obedience, but because they assumed the rightness of their decisions made no objection possible.

But even if a dead man now walking, Achilios was still Achilios. He had considered other courses of action that skirted the choices made

by Lilith's son and the thing called Trag'Oul.

He had Serenthia to consider...and that was the most important matter of all.

Achilios looped his bow tight over his shoulder, then started running. Death had not slowed him, and in fact, he could cover ground much, much faster now. He left little if any trail and could avoid nearly all obstructions.

From Hashir came screams and the clash of metal. Rathma had granted him abilities necessary to the cloaked one's demands and so Achilios knew what was going on inside even better than Uldyssian's edyrem. He also knew very well who was leading the struggle. That made the hunter increase his already astounding pace.

Around the outskirts of Hashir's territory he ran, pausing only to avoid the homes of those who lived beyond the city's walls. At all times, Achilios kept one sight in focus; the three towers of the temple. As with Toraja, the Triune preferred a location that gave them access through a separate gate. To Achilios, that should have been enough to warrant suspicion from anyone concerning them, for what reason would a noble and loving sect have need of a path of escape?

Of course, to be fair, before his own slaughter, Achilios doubted that even he would have paid much attention. Life had a way of blinding people. Only death seemed to truly open the eyes...

The gateway he sought finally came into view. One side was already open. The senior priests obviously did not trust their chances at this point. He wondered if they actually thought that their masters would welcome them with open arms after this fiasco. Then again, perhaps the Triune's true lords *would*...and then promptly flay all of them alive.

Achilios decided to save the demons the trouble. Freeing his bow, he reached for an arrow—and found himself staring at a startled Hashiri woman carrying a basket.

The moment she registered him, the woman shrieked. Achilios could imagine her shock and self-loathing filled him. However, for all he hated how he was, there remained greater priorities.

“Run...home...” he rumbled. “Go!”

She did not need more coaxing. Spilling the basket and its contents on the jungle floor, the woman rushed away.

The incident already forgotten, the undead archer notched an arrow—

And was promptly tackled by a heavy, armored form.

The dagger that sank deep in his chest would have killed him, if he had not already been dead. His attacker started to lean back, clearly confident of his strike. The vague outline of a morlu filled Achilios's

gaze.

The archer grinned, a sight he was certain would have been ghastly to any living person. "Too little...too late."

With a strength now as inhuman as that of the morlu, Achilios threw the bestial warrior high into the air. The morlu collided with a tree, cracking the latter in two.

Achilios, well aware how little that would stop his adversary, was already on his feet. The bow came up and a shaft went flying even as the armored assassin rose from the tangle.

With utter accuracy, the bolt hit one of the black eye sockets. As the morlu grasped for it, Achilios fired at the remaining socket.

Grunting, the helmed creature batted away the oncoming missile. However, Achilios had already expected that. His shot had only been to distract. The bow fell to the ground as the hunter pulled free a long knife. He leapt toward the morlu as the latter finally pulled free the one bolt, a sucking sound accompanying its removal.

The knife, honed sharp and wielded by an expert, severed the armored creature's head from the neck.

Achilios kicked the twitching body aside. He grabbed the head even as one of the morlu's hands sought for his leg.

Hefting the head, the archer threw it deeper into the jungle. Turning back only long enough to retrieve his bow, Achilios raced past the torso, which sought in vain to regain its footing. The foul magic animating it would last only a short time longer, too short for the morlu to save himself by retrieving his head. Achilios wondered if the same thing would hold true should someone remove *his*. Perhaps, if somehow the crisis passed and the others no longer needed his questionable aid, he would test it out himself. After all, what was there left for him? No love, no life...

The hunter grimaced. As an animated corpse, he had become very maudlin. All that mattered was fulfilling his mission and then dying again. Everything else he could leave to Uldyssian, Mendeln...and, if there was still hope, Serenthia.

If there was still a Serenthia.

The morlu had been a warning that the woman's scream had alerted some of those he sought. Achilios stuffed the knife in his belt, then readied another arrow.

By this time, four wary figures had emerged through the gate. Three were guards, the last a priest he estimated somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy. The guards faced different directions, evidently checking the safety of the immediate area.

The priest—his robes that of Bala—stared in the direction of Achilios.

The hunter let the bolt fly. With darkness to shadow it, it should have cut down the robed figure. Instead, the priest raised a hand—

Achilios's arrow exploded in midflight.

But the archer had already expected that something might happen. Barely had he let fly the first than he shot a second. As Achilios had surmised, the priest had quick reflexes, but not *that* quick. The second arrow burrowed deep into the robed chest, its momentum sending the prey falling.

The guards turned in his direction. One shouted something and two more came through the gateway.

Achilios fired three more bolts in rapid succession. One bounced off the breastplate of his target, the second caught a guard in the arm, and the third pierced the throat of its quarry.

The two survivors retreated to the new pair. They looked convinced that they were being attacked by more than one person, exactly as he had wanted. Achilios retreated from his location, blending into the darkness in a manner that he could only do by being dead.

There was no sign of another morlu, which possibly meant that the rest were involved in the chaos. That increased Achilios's chances of finishing the special task he had set upon himself. All he needed now was to continue pressing those seeking flight from Hashir.

But at that moment, he sensed something else in the jungle, something as unsettling to it as he was.

The ground below him heaved up, as if about to erupt. What at first he mistook for the upturned roots of the nearby trees shot up and around him. Only after the first had snared his leg did the archer see them for what they actually were.

Tentacles...the tentacles of some huge, grotesque creature burrowing through the soft dirt.

A creature that was not of Sanctuary.

As a second tendril snared his bow arm, Achilios cursed himself for forgetting the true patrons of the Triune. The priest he had shot had been a servant of Baal, the Lord of Destruction. Foolish of the archer to forget the man might have summoned another servant of the Prime Evil, a servant not in the least human.

Still, whether or not the dead priest had summoned this denizen of the Burning Hells was a moot point. What was important was escaping it; no easy task. It already had both of Achilios's legs and one arm and he had still not seen more than the tentacles. Instead, the only measure he had of his foe was that the ground everywhere around him continued to shake, as if whatever lurked below it was *gargantuan*.

Reaching the knife would have driven a living man to terrible

wrenching pain, but Achilios was thankfully beyond such mundane sensations. Thus, he was able to grip the blade just as another tentacle sought his wrist. Twisting, Achilios slashed at the tip, watching with satisfaction as the faithful edge cut through.

A low, thick thundering arose from beneath him. The jungle shook violently. If not for the very tentacles holding him, Achilios would have fallen on his back.

“Hurt you...did I?” he rasped triumphantly.

In response, another, thinner tendril shot out, wrapping like a whip around his throat. The appendage constricted.

Fortunately, unlike most, Achilios no longer breathed. He did not actually even draw breath when speaking. The power that animated him also gave him voice. Hence, while having his neck snared did slow Achilios further, it did not incapacitate the hunter as it would have a living being.

He took immediate advantage of the demonic creature’s misconception, slashing with the knife at not only the tentacle snaring his throat, but his other arm, too. Both times, Achilios struck true. A black substance resembling tar dripped from the cuts. The two appendages were instantly withdrawn.

Achilios wasted no time in assaulting the others. One received a shallow line across its width, but before he could do more, both retreated below the soil.

The hunter allowed himself a brief smile as he righted his balance. No beast had ever had the final laugh against him; that triumph, however short-lived, had been the archdemon Lucion’s alone.

Still, it was best not to simply stand there. Achilios plucked up his bow—

Again came the thundering that the archer had decided was the demon’s roar. A quake that toppled most of the trees near him also sent Achilios tumbling. This time, he lost not only the bow, but his knife.

“Damn!” he gasped. “Damn!”

And out of the ground burst a dozen tentacles of varying length and size. Whether they belonged to one monster or another did not matter, only that suddenly they snagged him by the legs, the arms, the torso, and the throat.

There was nothing he could do. Against their combined might, Achilios might as well have been a newborn baby. At this point, there was only one question as to his fate. Would the beast tear him to pieces—which might or might not actually finish the undead hunter, although it would certainly make him useless—or instead drag him down into the ground, a much more daunting prospect. Achilios had

been buried once; he found the idea of a second interment frightening.

The tentacles tightened. Achilios felt his body strain. Dismemberment was the decision made by his captor. The archer perversely wondered if he should thank the demon for that choice.

A brilliant *golden* light suddenly turned the jungle brighter than day. Achilios felt a warmth such as he had not known even before death and which, because it actually *did* warm him, stunned the archer that much more.

But if it warmed Achilios, the light did much more to the beast. Now the thundering reached an ear-splitting crescendo. The tentacles shook and Achilios noticed burning flesh.

The demonic appendages shot back into the ground. The jungle shook...then stilled.

The golden light vanished...leaving a puzzled and very disturbed Achilios. He lay there for a moment, uncertain if either would return. When neither did, the archer stood.

However, no sooner had he done so, than Achilios experienced an odd sensation. Had he been living, he would have thought it vertigo.

His legs gave out. The world swam. Achilios tried to reach his bow

—

And then all was blackness.

Eleven

Uldyssian had heard the voices for several moments now and although a part of him sought to react to them, his body would not obey.

“He has still not opened his eyes,” came what he vaguely noted as Mendeln’s voice. But that was not possible; Mendeln was lost to him. Uldyssian recalled thinking that he had heard Mendeln earlier, yet that, too, had to have been his imagination.

Have patience, young one. Her strike was as subtle as it was heinous...

Even unconscious, Uldyssian jolted the moment that the second speaker voiced himself, for the words resounded in both the head and soul of the son of Diomedes. He must have moaned at the same time, for that which sounded like Mendeln suddenly grew excited.

“Did you see? He stirred! Uldyssian! Listen to me! Come to me! By our father and mother, you’ll not leave me like this!”

Mention of his parents finally caused Uldyssian to actually wake. He remembered how he had felt when Mendeln had vanished; if this was indeed his brother, he could not very well let him suffer so, not if it was in his power to do anything.

And then there was Serenthia...

That proved more than enough. With a cry, Uldyssian struggled free of the last vestiges of unconsciousness. Immediately his body was wracked with terrible pain. He rolled about and perhaps might have hurt himself in the process if not for hands grabbing him by the shoulder in order to keep his body still. Yet again he heard Mendeln.

“Be at ease, Uldyssian! Be at ease. It will pass...most of it, anyway...”

There is much within that will take longer. The demoness is a poison deep in his blood...

“And I could have stopped her, if only you’d all have let me!” snapped Uldyssian’s brother. “I could’ve prevented so much!”

Not then. You would have been slaughtered and Uldyssian more in her grip...

“But you said that she went in unsuspecting of the betrayal! That alone—”

A third voice intruded just as Uldyssian forced his eyes open. Vague shapes and much darkness greeted the battered man’s gaze.

“My mother is very adaptable, Mendeln ul-Diomed. You saw how

quickly she turned potential defeat of her plan into a new and possibly more terrifying path toward her ultimate goals. Now she is nearer than ever to victory...and Sanctuary that much nearer to cataclysm."

Some of the agony subsided, enough so that Uldyssian could finally focus. The first thing he saw gladdened his heart, for it was his brother. Mendeln wore an uncharacteristically broad grin and Uldyssian knew that he wore the same.

"I thought you lost forever," the older brother told the younger.

"As I you."

"Your sibling was always safe," the third speaker interjected. In some ways, his voice was very similar to Mendeln's in both tone and speech, yet there was something about it that bespoke of great age and a person who was not entirely human...if at all.

And when the figure joined Mendeln in gazing down at Uldyssian, the latter saw that this was no mere mortal. The face was too handsome, the features too perfect. Most of all, though, the eyes held more than great age...they were so ancient that Uldyssian immediately suspected the worst.

"He is no demon," Mendeln quickly stated, recognizing his brother's reaction.

"Although Lilith is my mother," added the stranger.

With an animalistic growl, Uldyssian sought to grab the speaker. However, his body was too weak. Worse, intense pain coursed through him again, forcing him to lie back.

Only then did he notice the stars. Their positions were so different from what Uldyssian was familiar with, that he momentarily forgot the demoness's offspring.

"Where—where are we, Mendeln?" Uldyssian finally asked. "I don't recognize any of those."

It was the son of Lilith who responded. "You are somewhere and nowhere."

Such answers only served to stir Uldyssian back to anger. He did not trust being in the vicinity of a being who claimed Lilith as the one who had begat him. "And *who* are you? If not a demon, then *what* are you?"

"My name is Rathma," the stony figure answered without preamble. "Although that is not the name given to me at birth, but rather the one placed upon me by another after parting from my parents' ways. It means 'keeper of the Balance' which is also my function and duty."

Uldyssian had no idea what Rathma spoke about and cared less. "But Lilith is your mother..."

"And Inarius is my father. Yes, I see that name also fills you with dread. I bear no grudge for that, for both have become anathema to

me as I am to them. As to *what* I am, I am a nephalem...one of the very first, in fact..."

The revelation should have struck Uldyssian harder than it did, but quickly he realized that it had not because, horribly aware of who Rathma claimed for his lineage, there was no other possible answer.

"You...you are like us..."

Rathma shook his head. "No, I am unlike you or any of those who follow you. I cannot explain, but what you call the 'gift' has metamorphosed. There are abilities that I have that you do not just as you bear some I am lacking. I suppose this should not so surprise me since I am from the very first generation birthed on Sanctuary..."

So long ago as all that, Uldyssian thought in awe.

Lilith's son nodded as if having read the mortal's mind, then added, "There are few of us remaining, for when only my father was left of the original refugees, he was strict in his punishment of those who used their powers. He insisted that his perfect world, his Sanctuary, would remain as *he* desired it..." Rathma shook his head. "But for one who is eternal, my father should have known that nothing stays static."

That is enough for now, came that other voice from both within and without Uldyssian. He pushed himself up, seeking the source...and his eyes for some reason looked to the stars above. For the first time, Uldyssian imagined that he even saw a shape formed by the celestial lights. Not a complete one, but enough to give the illusion of a vast, half-hidden beast. A reptile—no—something more than that. It was long and sinewy like a great snake, but the head reminded him of another creature straight out of myth—

A dragon...yes, it looked like some sort of serpentine dragon...

The stars shifted...and it seemed to Uldyssian that the half-seen behemoth now stared *back* at him.

Though we would all wish it otherwise, you are not well enough yet for more strain...

Uldyssian swallowed, unable to believe his eyes, his mind, and his heart. "What—what are you?"

"He is *Trag'Oul*, brother," Mendeln explained quietly. "Born in creation, defined when the angels and demons who came here formed Sanctuary. He is more its guardian than any other can claim."

A simplified description, albeit most accurate...

Oddly, the introduction of this celestial creature was not what most demanded Uldyssian's attention. Hearing the dragon, then his brother, and recalling how Rathma had spoken...he felt as if he were listening to three extensions of the *same* being. Uldyssian looked from one to the other and the feeling only increased.

“Mendeln,” he muttered. “Mendeln, I want to leave here *now*. Both of us, I mean.”

“But we cannot, Uldyssian...at least not yet. There is so much to learn and you need recuperation.”

Rathma stood next to the younger son of Diomedes. “He speaks the truth. It would be unwise at this juncture.”

Uldyssian swallowed. Rathma and Mendeln looked more like brothers than he and his sibling did. The dark garments, the pale faces—and the nearly unblinking gazes—added further to the horrific effect.

Forcing himself to his feet despite the torture to his body, Uldyssian growled, “Mendeln! Look at you! Look at him! Listen to him and that—that thing!—and then yourself! They’re doing something to you!”

He felt his power rush through his body, fueling his emotions and strength. They had been wrong, his kidnappers. He was more than fit despite their games.

Raising his hands toward his brother, Mendeln replied, “No, Uldyssian! You must not do that—”

It was too late. Certain that not only were he and Mendeln trapped here for dire purposes but that his sibling was being turned into something to serve the dragon’s and Rathma’s needs, Uldyssian unleashed the raw forces within.

“You said he was too weakened by her to do this!” Rathma shouted, evidently to Trag’Oul.

He is different! They would all be different! They are no more nephalem than you are human! They are more—

But the fantastic creature got no further, for then it was that the dragon’s empty realm shook as if some giant hand sought to turn it upside down. Uldyssian knew that he was the cause but did not care. He had to free Mendeln and him from this black prison—

As if responding to his thought concerning his dark surroundings, the elemental forces bursting from Uldyssian took on a blinding brightness. Above, Trag’Oul roared. Rathma uttered something in a language unknown and momentarily the brightness lessened. But Uldyssian, fearing that if his effort failed then all was lost, threw his will into restoring the light.

Around him, the very blackness suddenly began shredding as if torn cloth. Utter white at first replaced it...then a mountainous landscape erupted full-blown.

Mendeln called out to Uldyssian, but the two looked now to be separated by miles. Fearing to lose his brother again, Uldyssian attempted to draw back within him the energies he had released, but it was as if they now fought against him. The new landscape began to

shiver and shake and seemed as ready as the blackness to shred apart.

But finally, Uldyssian managed to contain his powers. The effort sent him to his knees. His heart pounded and for a time his breath came in short gasps.

Then, slowly, he registered colder, drier air and soil much harder than that of the jungles. After having grown accustomed to the hotter climate near Kehjan, the change left him shivering. Only belatedly did Uldyssian finally regain enough control over his abilities to adjust himself to this new environment.

And new it was. He had thought at first that he had returned to the vicinity of his village, but nowhere around Seram were there mountains so great. In fact, nowhere that he had been looked like this region.

The sky was overcast, but Uldyssian could still see far enough to marvel at the landscape. No, definitely not near Seram, Kehjan, or anywhere else of which he had heard. Perhaps Mendeln might have—

Mendeln! How could he have forgotten about his brother? Spinning in a circle, Uldyssian looked for any sign.

But he was alone in the strange land.

“Mendeln!” Uldyssian roared. “Mendeln!” When he received no answer, the son of Diomedes switched tactics. “Rathma! Where are you, damn you? You want me—you and that thing—well here I am! Me for my brother! What say you?”

His voice echoed throughout the mountains. Without at first realizing it, one particular peak caught his attention. It was taller, vaster than the rest, almost as if a king among kings. The more he looked at the mountain, the more he felt drawn toward it.

With a colorful curse at Rathma and Trag’Oul, Uldyssian turned his back on the peak. Nothing good could come of it, not if it somehow sought to call to him. He trod up the sloping land, glad that he had not switched to the garments of the Torajians. They were thin and airy, not suitable at all for this region. Even though he could keep himself warm, just wearing shirt, pants, and boots gave him additional mental comfort.

Uldyssian reached the top of the hill upon which he had found himself and searched both with his eyes and power for any nearby settlement. However, if there were any in the region, they were hidden from him. All he saw or sensed were trees, hills, and the mountain again.

Uldyssian stiffened.

Yes, there it was. Not *any* mountain, but the very same peak from which he had been retreating.

“More games!” He glared at the overcast sky, seeking the dragon. “I

told you! Stop this now! Come for me if you want me!”

Again his voice echoed over and over, but still there was no reply. Uldyssian finally decided to get their attention.

Mustering his will, he clapped his hands together as hard as he could.

The resulting sound was like thunder, so loud, in fact, that it shook the trees and ground. Over and over it repeated, as if some massive but invisible storm swept through the area.

He waited, this time certain of success...but after several breaths, Uldyssian still stood alone.

“Damn you, Rathma!” Uldyssian roared. This time, though, his fury was spent. The echoes perished after only three or four repetitions.

Defeated, he knelt down by a rocky growth and buried his face in his hands. Each time Uldyssian began to believe he could face those arrayed against him, he was proven wrong.

Without warning, the ground shook again and for a moment Uldyssian thought that his efforts had caused some collapse or tremor. He leapt to his feet, not certain exactly what he planned to do, and saw that the shaking was confined to his immediate location.

More to the point, centered directly beneath the outgrowth.

He started to back away—only to find the ground rising up *behind* him as well. Ahead, the outgrowth swelled. It stood almost twice as tall as Uldyssian and nearly as wide. One part jutted above the rest, giving it some resemblance to a head.

And then two eyes opened up in the “head,” two eyes a deep rich brown and almost human. They glanced left, then right, then down at Uldyssian, who stood awestruck.

There was shifting in the dirt and grass that made up the mound. The outgrowth took a *step* toward him, huge chunks of stone and more breaking away. Another step...and more collapsing dirt and rock.

The thing now had two thick, solid legs. It paused, then began shaking itself like a wet hound. More dirt and stone flew away, some of it toward Uldyssian, who awoke from his astonishment just in time to deflect the most dangerous ones.

First one arm, then the second, formed. The earthen giant looked at the blunt end of the initial appendage. Stony fingers suddenly cracked through, a full hand created less than a breath later. The same then happened with the other arm.

Uldyssian backed up against the dirt wall behind him, but did not otherwise act. If a demon was about to attack him, then this thing was a slow-witted one. It seemed more like a sleeper waking than any threat.

The giant flexed its fingers, then surveyed its body as if seeing it for

the first time. The eyes shifted and Uldyssian could have sworn that there was a tremendous sadness in them.

It *spoke*. Through a crevasse suddenly forming near the bottom of the head, the creature spoke.

“Wwwho arrre yyyooou...” it began slowly, each syllable sounding as if the thing was clearing a throat of centuries of disuse. “Whhooo are you...” it repeated stronger. “That calls a name...that calls a name I haven’t heard for...so very, very long?”

As the voice cleared, Uldyssian recalled what he had noticed about the eyes. The voice, while still very gravelly, was also almost human.

“Who are you,” the being said a third time. “Who calls the...name of *Rathma*?”

“My name is Uldyssian ul-Diomed and if you are a servant of Rathma’s, then beware, for I’ve no love for your master!”

The giant studied Uldyssian, who now stood in a battle stance. Yet, something held Uldyssian back, prevented him from striking the first blow.

A grating, rumbling sound suddenly issued forth from the bizarre creature. Slowly it evolved into something recognizable...*laughter*.

“So glad I am...to have awakened for a time...if only to hear this...” The thing shook his head, sending more fragments flying. “*Rathma*! No sense of humor...in that one! He would be...offended...and for *me*! No, little Uldyssian ul-Diomed! Ha! Such a...long name for my...dry throat! I am no servant of...the dour one...I was...am...*Bul-Kathos*...”

He announced this as if Uldyssian would know the name and marvel at it. But as the former farmer failed to react, Bul-Kathos lost some of his own humor.

“The name...the name means nothing to you...has it been...has it been so long...” He studied hard his earthen and stone body. “Yesss...there is little of me and...much more of the world! What I dreamed for...what I decided must befall...me...is working well...even the forgetting...by mortal men...”

The wall behind Uldyssian collapsed. Uldyssian expected some sort of trick, but instead the giant sat down on a patch of ground that rose up to create a seat for him. Bul-Kathos eyed the empty area between him and Uldyssian.

“The years...they must number a thousand...or more.” He glanced up at the intruder. “Tell me, little Uldyssian ul-Diomed, know you...know you the names *Vasily*...and *Esu*?”

“The names mean as little to me as that of Bul-Kathos,” Uldyssian admitted. “But all would be preferred to be known by me than that of the monstrous *Rathma*!”

It initially appeared that Bul-Kathos did not hear the last, for he looked to the ground once more and muttered to himself. “No Vasily...where are you...my brother?” A slight, sardonic chuckle escaped the giant. “But no Esu, either! How that would irritate...her...” As quickly as the humor came, it disappeared. “If even she...still rages...”

Uldyssian cared little for the creature’s ramblings. All that mattered was that this Bul-Kathos—whatever he was—knew of Rathma. Perhaps somehow this could aid Uldyssian in rescuing Mendeln.

He focused on one comment the other had made. “Bul-Kathos, you speak of a lost brother. I’ve one also missing. His name is Mendeln and he is a victim of Rathma! If you could in some way aid me—”

Bul-Kathos looked up. “Rathma has...no victims. He is not...Esu...never Esu...if she still lives...”

Uldyssian finally gave up. Bul-Kathos had obviously long ago abandoned touch with others...and perhaps even himself. If the strange being was no threat, then it was time for Uldyssian to move on.

And again, his eyes shifted to the towering mountain. This time, Uldyssian wondered if he should go to it.

But as if reading his intention, the macabre figure, suddenly animated, leapt up. “Your path...lies *elsewhere*...young one...not there...”

That only made Uldyssian even more determined to reach the peak. “And why not there?”

“Because...it is forbidden...for you.”

To be told that further infuriated Uldyssian. Thrusting his chin out defiantly, he returned, “A good enough reason to journey to it, then.”

Bul-Kathos *swelled* in size and an ominous shadow crossed his earth and rock face. Even the eyes—the almost human eyes—now held a threat. “No. You will *not*.”

The giant moved toward Uldyssian, and as he did, more stone and dirt fell away. Now, although he still looked as if created from the very ground, Bul-Kathos wore the vague semblance of a bearded warrior. His skin was the brown of the soil and his hair the green of grass. There was nothing hesitant anymore about his movements—

Nor about his intentions toward Uldyssian.

Bul-Kathos raised a fist and in it formed a huge, stone club. He swung at the mortal’s midsection.

But the club deflected off an invisible barrier quickly created by his target. Uldyssian already sweated from effort; the giant’s strike had nearly penetrated.

“You are more than you seem,” rumbled Bul-Kathos. “A nephalem I

would call you, young one, if not for the fact that I and Rathma may be the last..."

"The last of your age, maybe," retorted the son of Diomedes. "But time has long passed you just as you've pointed out."

"But no matter how many centuries, I yet recall my duty well! And so Mount Arreat will remain forbidden for you and all else who would desecrate its interior!"

He struck the ground with the club and the land shook so much that Uldyssian toppled. More and more the earthen creature gave way to an ancient warrior. Clad in kilt and sandals and with a golden band around his head, Bul-Kathos resembled some barbarian deity...a barbarian deity who radiated raw force such as Uldyssian had never faced, not even from Lucion.

"We swore that the way to the mount would be forever sealed from those like Esu," continued a furious Bul-Kathos, "who would've used that within to further ravage a weakened world! And though the others may be more of the soil than even I desired to be, in their memory and our oath I'll continue to fulfill my sacred duty!"

He struck the ground again and Uldyssian, who had nearly gotten to his feet, fell back. Uldyssian turned that tumble into a roll, a wise maneuver as the club next shattered the stones atop which he had just lain.

"I am not the master of the elements that Esu was, young fool, but Bul-Kathos wields much might of his own!"

"And speaks about it even more!" snapped Uldyssian in turn. From his awkward position, he still managed to focus on his adversary. The giant made for a hard-to-miss target...

There was a sound like a thunderclap. The area between the two exploded, as if the very air had caught fire. Both combatants were thrown far from one another.

Uldyssian struck a tree, jarring his bones so hard he thought that they were all shattered. Despite that, he managed to immediately fall forward into a crouching position and seize a handful of dirt. He threw the handful high in the air and concentrated.

The dirt broke apart, becoming a whirling, blinding force that assailed the giant just as he regained his own balance. However, Bul-Kathos did not recoil, but rather inhaled...and sneezed. The whirlwind broke apart and the dust formed in a tight ball that landed in the warrior's brown palm.

With a bellowing laugh, Bul-Kathos raised his hand and the dirt stretched two directions, creating in the blink of an eye a spear with a tip that gleamed like a diamond. He threw the spear at Uldyssian.

Again, the former farmer raised a shield, but this time it was not

quite strong enough. The spear slowed, yet did not halt. Uldyssian pressed, but the missile caught him in the left shoulder. He cried out as the point penetrated—

Bul-Kathos was suddenly before him, the giant gripping the spear with both hands. He obviously intended to drive the spear deeper, for Uldyssian had managed to keep the wound fairly shallow.

“You were warned! If only you’d not refused to turn away, young one! I’m sworn to do what I must now!”

Uldyssian clutched the upper edge of the spear.

Lightning crackled along the length of it, racing to where his foe held the weapon. Bul-Kathos let out a roar as the powerful energy engulfed him.

Gritting his teeth, Uldyssian shoved the spear from the wound. Falling back, he touched the bloody opening, which immediately sealed.

The pair paused. Both Uldyssian and Bul-Kathos gasped for air as their gazes met.

“A fine battle!” the giant almost cheerfully called. “It breathes new life into me, recalls me the magnificent challenges I once faced daily...”

“You may find amusement in this, but I don’t!” Uldyssian snapped. “A friend is dead, my brother is lost, and the woman I love and those who trust in me might all be dead now while I waste my time on *this*!” He suddenly straightened. “Continue with your game, if you wish, Bul-Kathos, but I’m done with it all! Very well! Keep whatever foul secret you guard in that mountain to yourself!”

“I can’t trust that you’ll not be returning, young one, and though ’tis in part my own folly that you know of Arreat and that she houses something, I cannot let you live!”

The giant clasped his fists together, but before he could do whatever it was he planned, a figure materialized between them.

“But you will let him live, old ox. Not only live, but come with me to the depths of Mount Arreat...”

Bul-Kathos blurted the name before Uldyssian could. “Rathma!” Then, as the other’s words registered, a scowl spread across the giant’s gravelly features. “Inside the mount? Am I mad from isolation and only dream you? You’d never suggest such a thing!”

“I am as real as you, Bul-Kathos.” To prove his point, Rathma thrust a gloved finger into the taller figure’s chest. “And, perhaps, even more so,” he added, his glove coming away covered in ground and grass. Rathma shook his head. “I thought you would outlast even me...”

“I may yet, if you persist in this! How does this one come to need to visit the mount?”

“Because my mother has returned.”

It was all Rathma had to say. Bul-Kathos's face changed utterly. He spat, but instead of water, *mud* landed on the ruined ground. Uldyssian realized that Rathma had the right of it concerning the giant; Bul-Kathos looked much more like them now, but what the son of Diomedes had first seen was the truth. Bul-Kathos existed more as spirit; his true body had long ago been replaced by the soil in which he had lain.

It bespoke how very old the giant was and how very long he had likely stood sentinel over this mysterious peak.

“Lilith...” Bul-Kathos spoke her name like someone who had just discovered that they had swallowed poison. “She still bears the murders of my parents on her shoulders! They would've never let Inarius slay us, as she said he would, Rathma! I'm sure of it—”

“And I am not...but that is neither here nor there. My mother saved us only to become hers, a fate that would have been worse than death, trust me. As for my father...in the name of his sanctimony, he is capable of things just as terrible...”

That stilled the huge warrior completely. “Aye, I know that too well...”

“Then you understand why I shall now take Uldyssian to see Mount Arreat's secret.”

Bul-Kathos nodded. “Aye...and no one else'll stop you. If they still stand, that is. I've let any who can hear me know that the way must be clear for you and yours...”

With a swirl of his cloak, Rathma turned to Uldyssian. “Well, son of Diomedes, you wanted to see what lay in the mount. Come and I will show you.”

But something else concerned Uldyssian far more. “Where is my brother? Where's Mendeln?”

“With Trag'Oul. It must be so for now. Events are rushing forward even swifter than I had imagined that they could and he, too, must be ready to aid in the struggle.”

Despite Rathma's indifferent tone, Uldyssian felt every fiber of his being go taut. “What is it?”

“It is,” the ancient being said with a sigh, “what it has been. My mother. Lilith. I underestimated her. She has adapted once again...”

“What? What has she done?”

Rathma's gaze shifted to Mount Arreat. “She has gained control of your edyrem, of course.”

And before Uldyssian could respond...they both vanished from Bul-Kathos's side.

Twelve

Mendeln worried about his brother. He had no idea where Uldyssian had vanished to and the being called Trag'Oul was of no help whatsoever.

He is where he must be, just as you are where you must be, the dragon had each time answered to his question.

Where Mendeln was bothered him almost as much as the location of his sibling. He no longer stood in the empty darkness that seemed Trag'Oul's domain, but rather in a wasteland, a place where there had been much carnage long, long ago.

The landscape and sky were utterly gray and not the slightest hint of wind graced his cheek. Dust covered what Mendeln assumed were ancient buildings of some sort, buildings scattered far from one another. They all bore some similarity to one another, though. Some stood nearly whole, others were barely skeletons. In addition to the buildings, there were also signs that this place had been rich in tall trees and other flora as well. Now, though, there were only the petrified traces of that once lush time. Every plant, however, great or small, had perished at the same time that this settlement had come to ruin.

As had the inhabitants. Mendeln sensed the dead. They had died long, long ago. Longer than even legendary Kehjan had existed, yet they were not fully at rest.

He awaited some word from Trag'Oul, but the celestial creature was as silent as the grave. A frustrated Mendeln finally stalked toward the nearest of the ruins, where he began dusting off the upthrust corner of one.

Not at all to his surprise, the archaic words of the language Rathma had burned into his head were just barely visible. These, however, meant nothing to him, not even after Mendeln sounded them out. He understood the "letters," but they added up to nothing comprehensible.

Straightening, he muttered, "And so what do we have here, then? What?"

The legacy of the demoness's previous crusade... came the answer immediately.

Mendeln shuddered, but not only because of what the dragon had said. Since Uldyssian had pointed it out, even he now recognized the

similarity between his voice and that of the leviathan...not to mention Rathma, also. How long ago and how deeply had they infested his mind?

That question almost made him rebel against any further movement here, but the threat of Lilith and his concern for Uldyssian overrode the hesitation. In truth, thus far Mendeln had not experienced anything actually sinister at the hands of those who claimed that they wanted to be his mentors. In fact, if he recalled his own mind, they only acted on desires already stirring within him for the past few years.

And if learning from them could help save both his brother and his world...it behooved Mendeln to do whatever was necessary.

He stepped to the next ruins, the trek taking barely more than a heartbeat. Mendeln was aware that this was not right, that the distance should have taken much longer. However, he was grateful that he would not have to take what would have possibly been hours just to traverse his immediate surroundings.

The second structure was much more intact than the first. A quick dusting revealed more unknown words. This time, however, Uldyssian's brother did not so quickly give up. He repeated each rune with care, trying them in different vocal variations. Perhaps pronunciation was the mistake, he wondered. Perhaps—

Suddenly, the word before him made sense. A name, or at least a noun. *Pyragos*.

Quite pleased by his success, Mendeln spoke the word out loud. "Pyragos!"

Instantly, the ground around the ruined building shuddered. Mendeln stumbled back, already regretting his rash action.

From below burst a grotesque, fleshless form with wings stripped of the membranes that had once given them the potential for flight. The head was shaped like a bull's, even with two savage horns that interlocked in the middle. The fiend leaped up, dry dirt and what might have been drier skin dropping from it. Mendeln was immediately put to mind of the demonic presence that he and Uldyssian had fought in the jungle.

But something concerning this situation was not quite the same. First and foremost, the skeletal form rising up from its grave was shorter than the one in the jungle and its frame was much more petite overall despite the vast wings. Staring at it, Mendeln would have sworn that it was—or had once been—*female*.

Less certain than a moment before, he yet again repeated the name. "Pyragos?"

In reply, the ground to his *right* shook. In fact, the entire *landscape*

suddenly convulsed. He cursed himself as he leapt back. Once had been ignorant; twice had been utterly foolhardy.

Out of the wasted landscape rose a *legion* of monstrous corpses, none of them completely human and all nearly bone...or some equivalent to it. In fact, there were many that to his eye seemed more merely empty garments or shadowy images. They came in all shapes, all sizes, to his eye registering as once male, female, and...*simply other*.

But there was something about them that did not seem right. Mendeln had faced ghosts before and these were not such. He put a hand to the foremost, a winged thing with horns that, from its slight size and certain characteristics, Mendeln judged once female. The hand went through, not so great a surprise, but the sense of former life was not there.

They are the memories of angels and demons, came Trag'Oul's voice. *Their deaths so terrible that their shadows are forever burned into this place...*

Not real spirits. Mendeln wondered if either group had what he would have called a soul, but suspected not. Perhaps that was another reason they both coveted and distrusted humans...

Then...among them he sensed the coming of others. Misty forms milled around and even *through* the macabre memories, misty forms with which Mendeln was more familiar. These were true spirits, true souls.

But...of whom?

Show yourself to me! he demanded. *Show yourself!*

They did. A legion of men and women, many of them astonishingly perfect even in death, overwhelmed the visions of demons and angels. Mendeln recognized them for who they were, for their perfection was as Rathma's.

The children of Sanctuary's founders. The first nephalem and the immediate generations after.

The ghosts of the nephalem stood motionless, as if awaiting *his* next action. Mendeln had no notion as to what that might be and Trag'Oul appeared silent on the subject. Evidently, it was up to Mendeln to make his own path.

But with an endless array of dead before him, what was that path?

He looked to the foremost of them, a woman of such dark beauty that she made his heart beat faster. Her silver eyes stared into his without blinking.

Hoping that he was not making a fatal mistake, Mendeln reached out a hand.

The female nephalem immediately bowed her head so that the top

of it hovered directly before his fingers.

Acting on a hunch, Mendeln let the fingertips graze the lush, black hair. Immediately, he felt a force surge through him and a voice—a distinctly feminine voice—said to him, *I was Helgrotha...*

He pulled the fingers back. The nephalem raised her head, the silver orbs again staring into his own.

Curiously, although he had only heard the name—*her* name—Mendeln discovered that he now knew much, much more about her. He could imagine her as she had once been, from her birth to her death. Once, she had been nearly as powerful as Rathma and had watched over those creatures who lived during night as opposed to the day. She had been kind, but also firm in her protection of those for whom she had cared.

He stood there, wondering what next to do. The dead waited with him, forever patient, even if he was not.

“And what am I to do with you?” Mendeln demanded. “Will you march against Lilith for me? Will you? Will even one of you do this?”

The woman raised her left hand to him. The action startled Mendeln, who took another step back. But the specter did not attack. Instead, in her hand materialized a long, narrow object. A *bone*.

She offered it to him.

Having no idea what he should do with the grisly gift but certain that it would be folly to refuse it, Mendeln gingerly gripped the piece of bone.

“Thank you?” he blurted.

But even as the last word slipped from his lips...what had once been a nephalem called Helgrotha faded like a dying wisp of smoke suddenly caught in a breeze. Mendeln looked around and saw the rest of the ghostly legion vanish in like manner.

No sooner had they faded away, than the ruins, the visions of demons and angels—the *entire* wasteland—followed suit.

A moment later, Mendeln did the same, suddenly reappearing in the dark emptiness with which he was starting to become too familiar.

Say the word again. Say it, son of Diomedes...

“Pyragos?” Mendeln instantly felt a coolness in his hands, an almost refreshing coolness. He glanced down and saw the bone shimmer. It took all his will not to drop the fragment.

It is the first word of summoning and this the item that will better bind you to the powers involved in such an act.

The nephalem’s bone twisted, reshaped. It grew slightly shorter and much slimmer. One end narrowed to a point, then flattened. The edges grew sharp.

The shimmering dulled but did not completely fade. Mendeln stared

at what he held.

A dagger...an ivory dagger such as he had seen Rathma wielding.

They have accepted you who hears them—the children of angels and demons slain so foully—accepted that you will keep Sanctuary from becoming either the fury of the Burning Hells or the oppressive order and worship of the High Heavens. They who were the first birthed in Sanctuary and are, because of that, still more of it than either Lilith or Inarius can understand, forever open the link between the phase of afterdeath and that of living...

“Afterdeath?” Mendeln repeated, but the glittering stars did not further explain that term and Mendeln finally understood that he should define it as best he could on his own.

Take up the dagger in one hand, Trag’Oul then commanded. When Uldyssian’s brother had done so, the celestial leviathan added, *Turn it point down to your palm.*

Mendeln did not like where this was going, yet he still obeyed. “Great Trag’Oul—”

Prick your palm, son of Diomedes...

“But—”

It must be done...

He had come this far, Mendeln thought. Besides, all the dragon asked of him was a slight jab, nothing more. What harm could come of that?

What harm, indeed...

Mouth grimly set, Mendeln did as instructed. He pulled the point away almost as soon as it touched, so swiftly, in fact, that at first he wondered whether he had actually punctured the skin.

But a tiny red dot did form, so miniscule that Mendeln expected Trag’Oul to command him to try again. The dagger still hovered an inch or two above the palm...

Then, to his shock, a thin stream of blood rose from his hand to the blade’s tip. Only magic could explain this defiance of nature. The tiny stream covered the point...then continued to flow up, covering more and more of the narrow end of the blade and heading slowly but inexorably toward the hilt.

Mendeln could only imagine how much blood it would take to reach that point and started to pull his hand away.

Leave it...

Mendeln wanted to disobey, but did not. It was not that Trag’Oul had just cast some spell over him, merely that he yet trusted in the dragon that no harm would come to him.

But when did I start to trust him? Before he could answer that question, the first drops touched the handle.

The blood already flowing continued its journey, but no more rose from Mendeln's palm. In fact, when he sought the small wound, he could find nothing.

Watch...

His gaze returned to the dagger, where the blade was now colored crimson. Yet, the crimson grew more faded with each passing moment, until finally it disappeared.

The dagger is bound to you and you are bound to the dagger. Through it, you are bound to them and through them, the Balance.

"What is this *Balance*?" Mendeln called to the stars. "You speak of it and I think of it, but I have never known what it truly means!"

The stars moved, briefly erasing any semblance to a beast. When they returned to their proper positions, Trag'Oul replied, *The Balance is the even distribution of Light and Dark. Its essence is most significant to Sanctuary, but it goes beyond, to all of creation. A world where Dark rules would burn itself up. A world where Light commands would eventually stagnate. If either gained enough control of Sanctuary so that the other could not match it again, then that would be the end of all things...*

There was sense to what the leviathan said, or at least Mendeln saw it that way. Yet..."But should we not ever strive for good over evil?"

Light and Dark are not necessarily good and evil, son of Diomedes. Yes, good must outshine evil, but if the knowledge of evil is erased utterly, even good may turn on itself...

"Even still, I would never side with any demon!" Such a notion seemed incredulous.

What almost appeared mirth touched Trag'Oul's "voice." "*Never*" is a word rarely attained in fact. And would you ever join the cause of an angel...such as Inarius...who would keep Humanity bent low in prayer to him?

The dragon had him there. From all he had learned, Inarius's notion of what was right meant absolute obedience to him.

Mendeln shook his head. "I cannot believe that we must suffer two such forces without any hope..."

Did I say there was not? The High Heavens and the Burning Hells create their own notions of their absolute might. The dragon paused, then added, *They will someday find that they are far from the ultimate masters of all things created...*

Uldyssian's brother seized upon the other's words. "Are you saying that there is something more, something greater?" He recalled something that he had wondered about earlier. "The spirits of the firstborn; they have not moved on, but where do all others go? Where do the souls of my people go?"

To their rightful place...to beyond the reach of both the High Heavens

and the Burning Hells and this universe of tragedy they have wrought...

"What does that mean? How do you know all you say?"

We know because we know...

Mendeln noted the "we" and somehow felt it did *not* include Rathma. Were there others like Trago'Oul? Was that possible?

But the celestial beast said no more on the subject and Mendeln knew that, if he asked such questions, Trag'Oul would not answer him. Still, some of what the dragon had said just prior gave him hope again.

"Then, there is truly a chance for Sanctuary to be more than what they would have of it..." Mendeln clutched the dagger, which felt so right in his hand. It was not a weapon—although it could easily be used as such—but one key toward freeing Humanity's destiny from the angels' and demons' perpetual war.

However, that was only if he and Uldyssian managed to somehow help prevent Lilith and the mysterious Inarius from succeeding with their own plots.

The angel bothered him most. "This Inarius...Rathma's father... what does he do now?"

For the first time, Trag'Oul radiated uncertainty. *Lilith is a creature of many plots and although difficult to always ferret out, her mark is generally quite noticeable. Inarius, on the other hand, plays the game more subtly. It may be that we are already destined to fail against him, for he may have moved to defeat her and us simultaneously. Rathma can judge him better, but even he is uncertain as to how well...*

Which was a lengthy way to tell Mendeln that the angel was as much an enigma to his mentors as he was to the human. "But we know he acts as the Prophet, whose face stands unveiled for all to see! Surely, we can calculate his actions thus—"

Inarius stands utterly veiled even surrounded by a multitude of eyes. What is seen of the Prophet is never necessarily what he is, even more so than the Primus, who has been not one but at least three...

And here he brought up another point that had troubled Mendeln even before Rathma had whisked him away. "The demon Lucion was the Primus and he is no more. It is Lilith who wears that mask, surely."

But would Lilith have created such chaos in Hashir?

She would not have and Mendeln knew that. He had wondered at what had seemed irrational even for the demoness.

"Another commands?" Uldyssian's brother finally asked. "Another demon? That could work in our favor! If even indirectly this third interferes with her plots—"

It does not...in fact...it has accelerated it.

That did not bode well. With both him and Uldyssian gone, that left only Serenthia to watch for the demoness. Still, in many ways, Cyrus's daughter was likely far more capable than Mendeln. "Serenthia will guide the edyrem. They trust her. They will follow her in all things—"

The stars yet again shifted, then resettled. Mendeln had learned quickly that this was a sign of the dragon's displeasure. *Yes...they will heed the commands of your companion in the absence of your brother... and thus become Lilith's more and more...*

Mendeln let out a growl of frustration. "What are you not *telling* me? What is it you know?"

There was an unusual hesitation...and then Trag'Oul replied, *Uldyssian's edyrem believe that they follow your friend, but in doing so, they actually follow the demoness.*

"Follow—no!"

Yes...it is Serenthia of Seram that they see before them, but she is in truth Lilith and has been so since some days ago as Sanctuary counts time...

"Serenthia..." Mendeln fell down on one knee, so struck was he by the news. His mind raced back to Partha and Malic, who had worn the skin of another. "No...Serenthia...no...it cannot be..."

The skin of another...Lilith wearing Serenthia's skin...

Hashir might have been far smaller than Toraja, but the mark the edyrem left upon it—especially within the temple—far exceeded what they had done in the first city. The temple still stood, but it was awash in blood. The high priests had been made special victims, their bodies now hanging from the ruined pillars standing at the building's front. The power of the edyrem had allowed bolts a foot long to drive into the thick marble...after going through the soft flesh first.

Each of the priests had their arms held directly over their heads. The metal bolts had pierced the back of the hands, which had been first clasped together. Bolts had also been driven through the throats and torsos.

The suggestion for such a visual display had come from the woman now leading the edyrem. The priests had stolen away Uldyssian, Serenthia had vehemently claimed, and one by one they would be hung so until some voice among those remaining revealed where he was.

But all the priests perished, each swearing that they did *not* know what had happened to the mob's leader. Serenthia had seized upon that to further scour the area for supporters of the sect, especially among city leaders.

Three days after Uldyssian and his followers entered the city, Hashir was, in many ways, little more than a scar.

The populace hid while this happened, fearful of both the temple and the newcomers. However, on the fourth day, Serenthia—her long hair flowing wildly in the wind—went to the market center and proclaimed in a voice that echoed throughout the city that she had now brought peace and hope to Hashir. This was naturally met with some wariness on the part of the locals, but the edyrem ushered many out of their homes so that they could see that she spoke the truth.

To her captive audience, Serenthia offered the same as Uldyssian, but not immediately. The Hashiri had witnessed the might of the foreigners and so not a few were tempted. Yet, Serenthia did not show even those the way, although she among all the edyrem should have been able to do so.

Instead, in the very temple they had conquered and even as the bodies of the priests fed some of the local birds, good Romus found himself summoned for an audience with the master's first acolyte. He had no idea what Serenthia wanted of him, save that, if Uldyssian *were* no more—as was the rumor vilely spreading through the ranks—then she was their only hope of not only continuing on, but even merely surviving.

Serenthia had taken for her temporary quarters those of the local high priest. Romus, who had always been poor even when he had been a brigand, could only marvel at the silken wall coverings and gold-laced tapestries as he entered. Some of the regret that he had had for the harshness of the edyrem's actions in Hashir faded as he considered the Triune's massive, ill-gotten wealth.

A moment later, he stopped short. Serenthia lay stretched across a reclining couch, her gaze on a parchment in her hands. Her long, lush hair cascaded down her shoulders and even enshrouded part of her face. She was a breathtaking sight to behold even in her battle-worn garments, especially to Romus, who had been infatuated by Serenthia almost since the first he had seen her in the Parthan square.

He finally managed to clear his throat, which made her immediately glance up.

"Romus!" The smile that lit up her face kindled the fire in his heart. Had Serenthia asked him to singlehandedly fight a pack of the savage creatures called morlu, he would have willingly leapt into the fray. "I feared you wouldn't come!"

"How could I not, mistress? Anytime, for anything, all you need do is call and faithful Romus will rush to obey..."

She sat up. "How poetic! But come! Why are you standing all the way over there by the doorway?" Serenthia patted the couch. "Join

me here!"

Bowing low, he hastened to approach. At the couch itself, the onetime thief hesitated, but again Serenthia smiled and patted it.

He seated himself, leaving a respectful space between them. Romus looked at his mistress and immediately found his gaze captivated by her glittering green eyes. A small part of him vaguely wondered why he had once thought them blue. Surely, he could not have been so mistaken...

"Romus...you were one of those closest to Uldyssian besides myself."

It took him a moment to notice the past tense. "We'll find him, we will, mistress! Have no fear of that!"

She shook her head. "No, dear, loyal Romus...even though I've said so to the people, I don't think we will. Like his brother, I fear Uldyssian's lost to us forever!"

It was unthinkable. The master had defeated terrible demons and legions of warriors! Nothing could take him so easily...and yet...

"Some say...mistress...some say that they saw his brother near him just before he vanished...perhaps..."

"A disguise, like that worn by the two monsters who attacked me." Serenthia shuddered, which made Romus want to comfort her in his arms. "No, a demon took Uldyssian, of that I'm certain." Her green eyes bore deeper into his. "One almost took *me* even. Before Hashir."

He was aghast. "Mistress! When?"

"In the jungle. When Uldyssian ordered us across the river. You recall?"

"Aye..." Romus gritted his teeth. In some ways, it bothered him even more that she had nearly been taken than it did that Uldyssian was now missing. He found it impossible to imagine the edyrem without her.

"Uldyssian...and even Mendeln...protected me then. Since they vanished, I've worked as hard as I can to protect everyone else, but...I must tell you something, for your ears alone, dear Romus."

"What? What?" Without realizing it, he slid closer until they were nearly touching.

"I am afraid. *Afraid*. I can protect the others, but who is there now to protect *me*?"

The answer escaped him before he realized how it sounded. "Me! I'll always be there to protect you, mistress!"

Before his face could redden too much from shame, Serenthia suddenly put a soft hand to his cheek. She smiled. "You would? Would you *really*, Romus?"

It all began pouring out. "I'd give my life and soul for you, mistress!

I'd stand against all the powers of the Triune! I could never let anything happen to you!"

He expected her to throw him out for daring to speak so when it was evident to all how much the master had meant to her.

And yet...

"Romus..." Serenthia whispered, her lips so close that he was nearly ready to sacrifice his life just to kiss them once. "Romus... you've no idea how much that means to me..."

She caressed his cheek again, then, almost reluctantly, leaned back. The former brigand was unable to stop himself from exhaling sharply.

"If you mean what you say...and I so very much hope that you do... this gives me another idea..."

Still recovering from before, Romus managed only a grunt of inquisitiveness.

"You know how Uldyssian introduced others to the gift. But with me, he delved deeper...and that's why I think that my abilities grew faster than anyone else's."

"Very likely, very likely," he replied, glad to have a safe subject to discuss.

"I think...no...I *know*...how he did it. They were private moments, when he could focus on me alone. You did notice that there were times when he and I were gone for hours?"

Romus recalled some such periods and felt for the first time a jealousy that the master had been able to partake in them with the woman before him. "Yes...mistress..."

"Good!" Her eyes seemed to glow brighter than the torches in the chamber warranted. "Will you do me the honor of doing as Uldyssian did with me? It'll mean hours together, for which I apologize, but with both him and Mendeln gone, someone else must step up...and I suppose you could better protect me while I protect you..."

He could hardly deny her. "I'm yours, mistress. To my very soul, I'm yours. Teach me, if you think me worthy..."

"I find you *very* worthy," Serenthia returned in what from any other woman would have sounded coy to Romus. Not the mistress, though. Not her.

Steeling himself, the brigand finally tore his gaze from hers. She wanted him merely as a fellow comrade, nothing more. Everything that she had suggested made perfect sense; Romus should have felt honored for that alone. If the master was indeed never returning, as she clearly believed, the least that his loyal follower could do was to see that his legacy lived on.

Feeling better about his decision, Romus bowed his head. "When shall we start, mistress?"

Her smile curled higher. "Why not now?"

"Now?" He thought quickly. "Saron and some of the others'll need to know, mistress, so they can do without me..."

"They are capable of that already. You need go and tell them nothing...not even after tonight..."

Her hands went to his and when she touched them, a flush went through Romus. Trying to recover, he looked to the doors and only then noticed that they were shut.

"I want us alone...the better to concentrate," Serenthia explained. "You understand the need for privacy, don't you?"

"Yes...yes, mistress..."

She giggled, which caused his face to again flush. "And one more thing, dear Romus..." Her fingers intertwined with his. "*You* need never call me 'mistress'..."

Thirteen

It sounded to Uldyssian as if something immense was breathing.

The cavern in which he and Rathma stood stretched so high that the stalactites forming above had managed to grow many times the length of a man. The stalagmites had done fair, too, rising like squat giants from the floor.

Uldyssian felt as if he stood in the mouth of a hungry beast. The “breathing” only added to that disconcerting sensation.

It was the stalactites and stalagmites that were also the source of illumination for the tremendous chamber, for radiating from deep within each was a ghostly crimson light whose source he could only imagine. While he was grateful for their brightness, they, too, contributed to Uldyssian’s overwhelming sense of unease.

“This is as far as I can risk bringing us by other than physical means,” Rathma commented with his usual detachment. “You can sense why, I think.”

But now that he was getting over his astonishment at where he and his undesired companion had just materialized, what Rathma had proclaimed just before their arrival once more seized hold of Uldyssian.

Lilith had control of the edyrem...

Stirred anew by anger, he seized Rathma by the collar of his cloak. “What did you mean by what you said before?” Uldyssian growled as he shook the demoness’s son. “How did it happen? How did she do it?”

“You refer to my mother and her usurping of your followers,” the other said needlessly. “She is cunning and keeps herself well shielded, but I have gradually considered that she must have possessed the woman Serenthia at some point when she was out of your sight in all ways. From there, it was a simple task to—”

Head pounding, Uldyssian roughly released Lilith’s son as he thought of just when it might have been that the demoness had taken the merchant’s daughter. One incident immediately came to mind. Serenthia had gone to get water and for once, he had not used his abilities to monitor her. She had bent behind the lush plants and...and a moment later had *gasp*ed.

And fool that he had been, Uldyssian had taken her response to his concern at face value. He had forgotten the twisted ways of Lilith...

“Serenthia...” he whispered. “It can’t be...she can’t be dead...”

“And she is not.”

Confusion, hope, and distrust warred for mastery over Uldyssian. “What do you mean? It’s Master Ethon and his son all over again! That foul witch wears Serry’s skin like a damned dress! She slaughtered her then stripped her of her flesh!”

Rathma shook his head. “No...for the game my mother’s chosen to play, she cannot disguise herself so. Such a technique, while definitely demonic in nature, allows only a limited ability. Enough to fool some priests or household servants for a time, but not for extended periods and needs. For this, Lilith required a more careful, more delicate touch. She has literally had to make herself and the woman one. My mother is like a haunting spirit that now guides each movement of the body, yet your Serenthia is still within, but very, very deep asleep.”

Uldyssian’s heart, which had felt to him a moment before as if it had ceased beating, now pounded with renewed life. “Then, she’s all right? If we can cast out Lilith, Serenthia will be herself again?”

“That, I cannot promise, son of Diomedes. Her slumber must be very strong, so that Lilith can also have some access to her memories and thus better perpetuate the lie. Even if my mother is ousted, I cannot in full honesty promise that your friend will be restored.”

“I should’ve never been taken from Hashir! I’ve got to go to her immediately, then! Send me from this place or show me how to do it myself!”

But Rathma remained steadfast. “Had you been left in the situation from which we took you, you would have at this point been nothing more than a shell acting on Lilith’s behalf. She is constantly altering her plots as the moment invites, hence the difficulty of predicting her next move. Having taken the woman’s body and seeing the foolish attack by whoever in turn played her role as Primus, she obviously decided that you could not be trusted to lead as she wanted. In fact, my mother is the reason that you were so weakened at the last moment. Clad as someone so dear to you, you let her through much of your guard. She infiltrated your body and soul, manipulating your thoughts and actions. If we had not taken you when we had, Hashir would have proven the point where Lilith took utter mastery over you, as well, Uldyssian.”

“So, instead she has it over Serenthia and the others,” Uldyssian retorted. “Your help seems more trouble for me than it’s worth...”

Rathma acknowledged his comment with a slight tilt of his head, adding, “I have erred much too much. I agree. But alone you would have fallen quickly to her. There is still opportunity to remedy this, if you will just listen.”

“Serenthia—”

“Will be lost forever if you try to separate her from Lilith at this juncture. As distasteful as I, too, find it, my mother must be given her free hand for the moment. But only for the moment.”

Such a vile thought did not sit at all well with Uldyssian. He could not imagine what would become of Serenthia and the rest under the wicked guidance of the demoness. Yet, he had to admit that confronting Lilith would be a monumental task; how could he keep from injuring or possibly even slaying Serenthia?

“What can we do?” he finally demanded of the pale figure. “Tell me that, at least!”

Rathma gestured ahead to where a passage at the far end beckoned. “We can go on to where we should.”

It was the sort of answer that Uldyssian had unfortunately expected. Still, as much as possible, he intended that matters would from here on go as he wanted. With that in mind, he strode off at a quick pace past the other.

Taller and longer of leg, Rathma quickly caught up to him. Lilith’s son then kept pace, perhaps trying to make Uldyssian not feel so guided.

They journeyed through a mazelike series of corridors that someone had meticulously carved out long, long ago. The corridors had no illumination, but Rathma pulled free his dagger, uttered a word in the strange tongue he had used previous, and suddenly the blade shone. Because of that alone, Uldyssian finally fell back a step behind his companion.

As they made their way, Uldyssian could not help but feel that someone or something watched them. He did not broach the subject with Rathma, for fear of the answer that the other might give. Uldyssian had enough with which to concern himself already.

After what seemed the dozenth meandering passage, Rathma finally looked back at him. “We are nearly there. I ask that you pay careful attention to yourself...”

The black-clad figure did not clarify what he meant. Uldyssian resolved to continue to keep on his guard. What else could he do? The breathing sound that he had first heard in the outer cavern was not so loud it pounded in his ears. Whatever it was that they sought, it was very likely also the source of the ominous sound.

Then, but a few steps after Rathma’s warning, what felt like a wave of intense heat washed over Uldyssian. Yet, the heat rolled through him from *within*, not without. He felt his pulse quicken and all his concerns—Serenthia, Mendeln, the edyrem, and the rest—magnified at least a thousandfold. His step faltered and it was all he could do to

smother a moan.

Ahead, Rathma continued on as if unmindful of his plight. That only upset Uldyssian more. How could the fool not see that they wasted their time, that they faced insurmountable hurdles? How could he—

Rathma's warning came back to him. Shaking with effort, Uldyssian forced away the rising fears, the worries...and suddenly the heat within dissipated.

"You are better again?" the cowled figure asked without looking back.

"You could've given better warning than you did!"

Still facing the path before them, Rathma shook his head. "No, regrettably, I could not."

Uldyssian might have argued that, but then a faint red gleam arose from the far end of the corridor. At the same time, there came a sound like shattering glass that reverberated through the passage. Uldyssian stepped up next to Rathma, who slowed his own pace.

"Stay near me when we enter the chamber. Our way is not completely clear."

"Not even for you?"

"This place is of my father's making."

His words were punctuated by another loud crash. Keeping wary, Uldyssian did as he was bade. His pulse raced again and although he knew that it had to do with what lay farther on, he was unable to calm himself.

"What is it?" Uldyssian finally had to ask.

"The making and unmaking of us. Inarius's ultimate yoke for humanity. You shall see..."

As they drew closer, the crimson gleam—and the slow but incessant *breathing*—grew even more pronounced. Whatever lay within the chamber glittered as bright as a sun. Rathma muttered something and his dagger dulled. However, Lilith's son did not put the weapon away.

"Be wary..." Rathma warned as they reached the end of the corridor. "Take each step slowly."

Together, they entered the new cavern. However, immediately the light became so glaring that even when Uldyssian shielded his eyes, it was impossible to see beyond his own feet.

And then—"We are under attack!"

The warning from Rathma barely came in time. A high-pitched squeal almost deafened Uldyssian. Acting on instinct, he immediately created a barrier above him.

There was a heavy thump and an angry shriek. Uldyssian heard the flapping of wings. It was swiftly followed by scratching and more

squealing. He was under assault by more than one of the foul creatures.

Uldyssian spun around so that he faced the tunnel. That enabled him to just barely see. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a leathery wing.

From elsewhere, Rathma called out. Uldyssian did not understand him and so assumed that the ancient figure was casting some sort of spell. That reminded him that he, too, supposedly had fantastic abilities. Swearing under his breath, Uldyssian listened for the next approaching attacker.

The sound of wings from his left was all that he needed. He thrust a hand in that direction.

Whatever flew at him let out another squeal. Whether this was designed to shatter his eardrums or for some other reason, Uldyssian now used the cry against the creature. He repelled the squeal, letting it strike back with several times its original intensity.

From the direction of his foe came another shriek, followed by the thumping of a body against what Uldyssian believed rock. The shrieking continued, but with a pained tone to it. Thumping accompanied the cry, as if the winged beast was going through convulsions.

Rathma somehow cut through the multitude of squeals. "Uldyssian! Back up to my voice!"

Uldyssian obeyed. An anxious breath later, he collided with what he hoped was the pale figure.

The ivory dagger flashed before Uldyssian's pained eyes. Before he could react, he heard Rathma chant something.

The dagger flared, blinding Uldyssian. He wondered if he had been duped all along, that Rathma had brought him here at Lilith's request so that she could humiliate him one last time before he perished.

Yet after that moment of blindness, Uldyssian's eyesight not only returned, but became *normal*...something even he, with his powers, had not been able to accomplish. Now he could see well enough to turn from the tunnel.

And what he saw left him dead in his tracks.

The cavern he stood within dwarfed the previous one. It dropped deep below as well as rose high above. Rathma and he stood on what was actually some wide, ancient platform carved from stone. It was several yards long and at the end stretched to each side. Uldyssian realized that if the creatures had driven him much farther to the right, he would have fallen to his doom.

A low wall lined the platform and at the corners were small constructions built like step pyramids. Atop each glowed a tiny—and

in this chamber—insignificant light.

The chamber's own color reminded Uldyssian of a living heart fresh with blood. He only studied that aspect for a moment, though, for that which was the focus of this place now demanded his absolute attention.

It resembled some of the crystalline formations that, as a boy, Uldyssian had found in the small caves at home, but none of those had stood well over a hundred feet high—perhaps even more than two hundred, since the base was too deep down to view—consisting of several monoliths jutting in a dozen different directions. Unlike the formations he recalled, this behemoth had a harshness to its look, with its jagged appearance and frightening crimson color.

Each facet of the gargantuan formation contained thousands of minute ones. From within it emanated not only the illumination that had so burnt Uldyssian's eyes, but, deeper yet, flashes of multicolored lightning. The overall light from the great crystal not only extended the entire length and breadth of the cavern—itself vast enough to fit the village of Seram and its surrounding lands within at least twenty times over—but looked as if it seeped through the very stone walls.

With each burst of lightning, the formation pulsed and at last Uldyssian understood the source of the “breathing.”

There came another ear-tearing, shattering sound. Uldyssian looked up and for the first time noticed that smaller fragments of the crystal—“smaller” as in only two or three times his height and width—floated around much of the cavern in seemingly random directions. The harsh noise had come from two such pieces colliding. The broken fragments spilled around—and then began to re-form in different designs.

All this Uldyssian drank in in only a few scant seconds. Then, a more immediate and highly grotesque sight took Uldyssian's attention from the astounding crystal. Four winged furies with heads resembling skinned hounds dove down at him from various points above. The creatures had savage teeth and ears long and wide. Their snouts were fat, with wide nostrils. The only thing the heads lacked were eyes. There were not even gaps where the eyes should have been. It was almost as if whatever had created them had forgone such on purpose.

Perhaps that was not far from the truth. Of what use were eyes in this place, where only Rathma's magic had enabled Uldyssian to see *anything*. Of better use were the huge ears and the nostrils, which could ferret out any prey entering.

Each of the beasts had a wingspan of at least six feet, and like the bats they somewhat resembled in shape, those wings were also their hands. Yet, unlike bats, the claws of these aberrations were each longer than Uldyssian's hand and so razor-sharp that to be cut by

them even once would surely cause a gaping, dangerous wound.

Uldyssian cupped his hand. A blue energy formed over his palm. He threw it at the nearest of the fiends.

The blue energy engulfed its target...and vanished in a puff. The winged fury shook its head, stunned but otherwise unhindered. Certainly not turned to ash, as Uldyssian had assumed it would be.

Startled by this failure, he barely recovered in time to re-create the shield. Even that was not as strong as it generally was, and with three—then four—assailing it, Uldyssian began to sweat.

It was Rathma, naturally, who supplied an answer. From farther in, Lilith's son—his vast cloak seeming to provide him with the same protection as Uldyssian's barrier—shouted, "Your powers are dampened here! It is the effect of the crystal! You must focus harder, whatever you attempt!"

Cursing the other for not having told him this before they had entered, Uldyssian concentrated more on the barrier. By now, seven of the bizarre beasts fluttered about him, each seeking to shred his flesh. Up close, he saw that they had no true bodies whatsoever. There were the shriveled remnants of a torso and what might have been vestigial legs. The creatures were essentially composed of wings and head. Uldyssian wondered whether they even ate...then decided such a question was one for which he would prefer not to have an answer.

Mouths snapped at his face, sometimes coming much closer than he desired. Forcing himself to calm down despite the frenzied efforts of his attackers, Uldyssian wondered how best to defend himself. What he had assumed a deadly attack had failed miserably. Uldyssian had to choose well, for when he struck, his shield would also weaken. Even with his recuperative powers, he doubted that he would survive long should even one beast manage a slash.

In the end, there was only one strategy that came to mind, a variation on something he had done earlier. Drawing himself up, Uldyssian took a deep breath...and whistled.

To his own ears—and hopefully to Rathma's as well—all he did was let out a long, loud, single note. Certain that his efforts would again be muted by the massive crystal, the son of Diomedes concentrated as much of his will as he dared—possibly even more—into the whistle. As he did, he felt a wing brush against his shoulder...

But in the next instant, just as what felt like a claw touched his arm, *every* winged monster around Uldyssian let out a bloodcurdling shriek. They pulled back from him, then whirled around as if entirely mad. Two immediately collided, but instead of merely separating, tore at each other as they had at the human. Another crashed into the rocky wall of the cavern, then repeated the accident over and over

until it finally crashed on the floor.

Three others simply *dropped* to the ground, where they screeched and shook their heads as if trying to remove something.

"I would not have believed it if I had not witnessed it," Rathma called in his ear. The cowed figure stepped up next to Uldyssian. "What you did should not have been possible for you in this of all places."

"I just followed your advice. I just concentrated harder. It worked."

"It should *not* have...especially not to this degree. Look around you, Uldyssian ul-Diomed. Look around you and see the truth of that."

Uldyssian did as he was bade...and his eyes widened at the results of his desperate attempt.

More than three score creatures either flew or lay in states of chaos. Two collided with floating fragments. Several fought furiously with one another, while others on the ground twitched wildly. At least two were savagely biting themselves to such a degree that their deaths were certain.

Then, two in aerial combat dropped. A moment later, some of those on the floor stilled. As Uldyssian looked around, the cavern's denizens one by one simply fell to the ground...and *died*.

"I don't—I don't understand..."

Rathma shrugged as if it should all make perfect sense to anyone. There was a red scar on his chin and a tear in his garments just above where Uldyssian supposed his heart should be. The creatures had gotten closer to slaying the ancient being than they had the son of Diomedes. "You recalled their similarity to bats, obviously. You imagined that, if you whistled loud and used the power within to amplify it, you would at least injure or confuse some...yes?"

"Yes...but...I thought I might succeed with those before me, but..."

"You should have been fortunate to do that, even with my warning." Rathma shook his head. "Uldyssian ul-Diomed, you are not what you should be." He looked over his shoulder. "And the reason for that *must* have to do with you..."

That to which Lilith's son referred was none other than the vast, menacing crystal. Even with bat creatures perishing all around them, Uldyssian could not help but again stare in fascination at it. Never could he have imagined such a thing existing.

"What is it?" he at last asked. "Why is it here?"

Rathma gestured at the floating giant. "It is the reason why no nephalem or anything akin to it has risen lo these many centuries, my friend. It is the reason why you and yours should *not* exist! You stand before the curse of all the descendants of those angels and demons who forged Sanctuary! You stand before the *Worldstone*..."

Merely hearing the name sent an involuntary shiver through Uldyssian, as if some part of him should have always known of this incredible artifact...known of it and rightly feared its existence.

Even with the aid of Rathma's spell, the Worldstone was hard to eye directly. Uldyssian discovered that he could best observe it by glancing slightly to the side. Even then, it sparkled as if reflecting a hundred red suns.

"Inarius thought the nephalem a disease, a disgrace to what he was. To him, we should have never been. He only agreed to consider our fate as opposed to erasing us from existence because of the protests of the others. I feel that he would have yet chosen to follow through with his original intention if not for my mother murdering the other refugees. That act altered everything. Had Inarius exterminated us afterward, then he would have been all alone, something which even he could not stand. Yet, the notion of the nephalem disgusted him and that is why he took the Worldstone—which had been created in great part as a manner by which to hide Sanctuary from the eyes of the High Heavens and the Burning Hells—and *altered* its resonance."

Uldyssian had been trying to follow Rathma's tale as best as possible, but did not understand the last at all. "What does that mean? What would that do?"

"What it means is thus; in addition to secreting this realm, the Worldstone also began a steady and subtle dampening process. Each succeeding generation of nephalem became far less powerful than the previous, until, in very short order, those next born were bereft of *any* ability. Soon, only a few from the first generation—myself and Bul-Kathos, to name the obvious—survived. The gifts—or curse—of our forebears was forgotten. Inarius began reshaping Sanctuary to his satisfaction...and to his iron rule."

Uldyssian could feel the Worldstone's radiance and did not doubt that it had the ability to utterly smother his powers. Yet, why was it not doing so now?

"This is the work of Lilith," Rathma quietly declared.

"Do you read my mind?"

The demoness's son shook his head. "I read...*sensations*. It is almost like reading thoughts, but far more accurate, for thoughts can be filled with lies."

Once again confused, Uldyssian turned back to the subject at hand. "What's she done?"

"Clearly, my mother altered the resonance of the Worldstone again, so that now its effect is minimal and limited more or less to Mount Arreat, if that. Even in its presence, you were able to overcome it. With the Worldstone no longer a hindrance, the natural process

enabling the nephalem powers could now flourish. You are the result of that...the first, anyway.”

The more he stood near it, the more Uldyssian sensed the Worldstone’s emanations. He imagined them a thousand times greater...no, a thousand thousand times. What Rathma had said made more sense. With such mighty forces sweeping over Sanctuary, his kind would surely never have come into existence. Only Lilith’s interference had changed that.

He suddenly cursed the artifact, hating it for having smothered the potential of all humans, hating it for failing that duty and forcing him and his followers into their current desperate situation.

Then, something occurred to him. “Rathma...could it be altered again?”

“A question I have pondered and the true reason we are here, son of Diomedes.” The black-cloaked figure gestured toward the Worldstone. “What would you have of it? Would you return to what you once were? Make yourself somehow more mighty? Tell me, Uldyssian ul-Diomed...”

Uldyssian would have liked desperately to unmake all that had happened to him, to somehow return to the day before Lilith had entered his life and begun his trials. Yet he doubted that even the Worldstone was capable of that. At most, it would remove from him and the others the nephalem gifts. Unfortunately, it would not remove the threat of the Triune, now surely determined to deal with those defying its will and existence. Moreover, he doubted that the angel Inarius would let things be, either.

Which left only one option...

“Can the Worldstone really be altered to make us more powerful?”

“No, not directly, but it can be altered to encourage the gifts’ growth. That would, in essence, result in much the same of what you desire.”

To Uldyssian, that was all that mattered. “Tell me what I can do.”

“This is the Worldstone. For you to achieve what you desire, you must think it. The crystal will either accept your will or deny it.”

“That simple?”

Rathma grimaced. “No...not in the least.”

Tired of his companion’s murky and often contradictory statements, Uldyssian turned his complete focus on the huge crystal. The Worldstone pulsed almost hypnotically.

You must think it... Rathma had said. Uldyssian tried to clear his thoughts, then concentrated on what he wished.

We need to be stronger, he told the Worldstone. *We need our powers to grow faster...*

The Worldstone did not outwardly change in any way, but Uldyssian felt something within start to shift in response to his probing. He repeated his desire, emphasizing the need for more power and quickly.

But the slight shifting of—of the *resonance*?—went no further. Try as he might, Uldyssian could not do more. Although he forced every iota of his will upon the Worldstone, in the end it was he who fell back gasping and defeated.

Rathma's gloved hands took hold of his arm. Sweating and furious, Uldyssian glared at his companion.

Lilith's son wore an expression of utter shock.

That, in turn, left Uldyssian momentarily gaping. He had never seen such a show of raw emotion from Rathma.

"What's wrong?" he finally managed to ask. "Is there danger?"

"*The Worldstone...*" the pale figure whispered almost reverently. The narrow eyes darted from Uldyssian to the gleaming artifact and then back to the human. "I wanted to see...but I never *expected*...it was a theory...no more than that...no more..."

Again, he made no sense to Uldyssian, especially after a glance at the gargantuan crystal revealed nothing changed. "What're you talking about? I *failed*."

"Do not look with your eyes...look with your mind and soul."

Brow furrowed, Uldyssian stared again at the Worldstone, but this time also delved into it using other senses. He still found nothing different; the Worldstone reverberated as it had before, not even the slightest—

No...there was a hint of a change, so intricate that it was no surprise that he had earlier missed it. But such an alteration could hardly cause any worthwhile effect...could it?

"I did something after all. Not much. Will it mean anything?"

Rathma uttered a sound, then murmured, "Observe the structure of the artifact, Uldyssian. Observe it at the very core. You can do that..."

Uldyssian concentrated more...and found himself staring deep within the Worldstone. He saw the fine, crystalline pattern that made up the fantastic formation and marveled at the minute details. Tiny, five-sided segments multiplied endlessly and formed the stone's most basic structure. Uldyssian could not help but admire their perfection. That the artifact had been *created* as opposed to being a natural formation astounded him so much that he briefly forgot the trouble it had caused him.

But none of this had to do with his search. He was about to give up when one small area near the heart caught his attention. There was something not right about it. Immediately, Uldyssian knew that this

was the source of the alteration in the Worldstone's resonance. He thrust his mind deeper, seeing more detail—

Seeing where the rest of the Worldstone was composed of a five-sided pattern, this one part had six edges.

What had been perfect, was now flawed...impossibly so.

He withdrew immediately. "Lilith's work—"

"No, son of Diomedes...your work." Rathma's gaze burrowed into him. "My mother altered the resonance through a spell, which affected outcome but not structure. I expect you to do the same, or more likely, fail. It was a desperate chance, but one I felt worthy. You had been cast this near the Worldstone for a reason, I thought..."

"It was an accident that I came here."

"Have you not discovered yet that there are no accidents?" the shrouded figure returned. "I did not know what to expect, but certainly not *this*. Uldyssian ul-Diomed, you have altered the very *essence* of the Worldstone, something that should not be possible..." Rathma frowned. "And whether that means good or ill for our hopes, I fear that we can only wait...and pray..."

Fourteen

Achilios stirred. He did not wake, for the suggestion of waking itself referred to sleep, which was an impossibility for one in his state.

Yet he had not been conscious. As the archer slowly pushed his face from the muddy jungle soil, he wondered what had happened to him. Achilios recalled the tentacles of the Triune's demonic servant starting to pull him asunder, but after that, it was all a blank.

Thinking of the beast, he leapt to his feet. Achilios gave thanks that, despite the lurid tales he had heard as a child, he was at least a very *agile* dead man. He supposed he should be grateful to the dragon for that, but in some ways being so near to alive, and yet not, left a bitter coldness inside. Near to alive was not the same as *being* alive.

Then, memory of what he was actually doing in this part of the jungle came back to him. Achilios spun around to face Hashir.

But the edge of the city closest to his location was in ruins.

He stared without blinking—another habit of the living he no longer required—trying to decipher just how long it had been since the destruction. The gates, the walls surrounding them...those had been smashed as if by giant fists. Within, two of the triple towers had been destroyed, one not even visible anymore from his point of view. The sole remaining tower—Dialon's, if Achilios was not mistaken—leaned precariously. A hint of smoke rose from the area below the towers.

This destruction happened at least a day, maybe two, Achilios estimated. Hopefully, no more than that.

Yet, even that was too long. *She* would not be here. At first chance, she would have ordered Uldyssian's followers on...but to where? He no longer understood her plan, not that any of it mattered that much to him now. Only one thing was of importance to the hunter, no matter what Trag'Oul or Rathma might insist otherwise.

Serenthia—*his* Serenthia—had been possessed by the damned demoness.

At the thought of what Lilith had done, Achilios seized up his bow. He imagined Uldyssian's treacherous lover in his sight. An arrow through the heart. An arrow imbued with the magic of the serpentine dragon...

But that would mean slaying Serenthia as well.

Despite what he knew *they* would insist, Achilios felt that there *had*

to be another way. Serenthia was not dead, her flesh peeled off so neatly by demonic magic so that Lilith could parade in it. No, the woman he loved was still there, albeit deep asleep. Somehow, she had to be stirred awake so that she could battle Lilith from within while others fought the demoness from without.

Somehow...

First, you've got to track her down, you dolt! He had no idea how much of a head start Uldyssian's followers had or whether they were proceeding to the same destination as originally intended. All Achilios could do was what he did best. Follow his target.

It was daytime, which meant that the living were about. However great the devastation on this end of Hashir, the common folk would still need to eke out a living, be it hunting, farming, or fishing. Achilios was grateful that no one had come across his body, lest he find himself forced to dig out of yet another grave, or worse, trying desperately to douse the fires of a pyre. His lone encounter with one of the locals had been enough to make Achilios wary of any repeat. He was too recognizably dead even on his feet. Equally frustrating was the fact that, thanks to his collapse, he had more dirt than ever caked on his body. A quick attempt to brush some of that away had proven nearly as futile as removing the original coating. It seemed that the soil in general believed that Achilios belonged to it and refused to give up attempting to put him under again.

He would not allow it to do that until he had done everything he could for his beloved.

Like a shadow, the hunter slipped through the jungle around Hashir. Twice, he came across some of the inhabitants, but they were slow of wit compared to him and Achilios readily avoided detection. He finally managed to reach the area beyond the ruined gate, where he hoped that he would find clues to those he sought.

That actually proved easier than he thought. The edyrem had grown in numbers again, so much so that the trail they left was like that of a herd of the giant animals with the snakelike noses that the lowlanders used for some chores or rode almost like horses. Even a blind man could have followed the mass exodus he confronted.

But what surprised him was that they were not headed, as they should have been, on the route that would take them to the main temple. Instead, they were veering even farther south, to an area he knew nothing about.

What was Lilith up to?

Achilios shoved on. Whatever it was did not ultimately matter. He would catch up to them no matter where they journeyed.

Hopefully, by then he would have some plan...

They are returning...

Those three words cheered Mendeln more than he could have imagined. He looked up from the task the dragon had set for him, learning how to even better focus his will through the astonishing dagger. It had been going surprisingly well. He was amazed at his inherent ability to manipulate the tool, especially considering how short a time it had been his.

But now, all interest in the blade vanished as he stood up and looked around. "Where? Where?"

And suddenly, Uldyssian and Rathma stood before him. His brother appeared as relieved as he. The sons of Diomedes hugged one another while Rathma gazed on stone-faced and a sense of amusement radiated from the celestial serpent. The many images of life continually flashed into and out of view as the creature undulated.

Be not so disdainful of familial affection, my good Rathma, Trag'oul remarked so that all could sense him.

"My experience with such has not been the best and you should know that."

Mendeln and Uldyssian separated. The first thing out of Uldyssian's mouth was, "Serenthia...Lilith's possessed her...it happened before Hashir..."

"As I also understand it, although at first I feared that she had been slain like Master Ethon." Mendeln gave the starry being a short look of frustration for that temporary shock. Still, Serenthia's current situation was not all that much better. "We must find a way to force the demoness out..."

"That will not be so simple," interjected Rathma. "I know of old how tight my mother can cling to that which is of use to her...as you might also recall, Uldyssian ul-Diomed."

Uldyssian bared his teeth at the tall figure. "I don't give a damn! I've got to save her...and the others, too! At the very least, they need to be warned!"

Rathma looked to the dragon. "Trag?"

Her influence is already mounting. Uldyssian is weakened in the eyes of his edyrem.

"And whose fault is *that*?" Mendeln's brother roared. He shook a fist at the stars. "Who took me away? Who *kept* me from going to her?"

Had you returned immediately, in the condition that you were in, she would have easily subdued you...

"He speaks the truth," Rathma added. "She had already infested you with her darkness. A return to Lilith at that time would have only

served to allow her to complete her spell.”

Mendeln understood just what they were saying, but felt the need to defend his sibling. “Why could we have not done more, then?”

“You should understand better than that,” returned Lilith’s son bluntly. “Trag’Oul cannot be known to exist, neither by my dear parents nor the Burning Hells or High Heavens. For the greater good of all Sanctuary—and for its very survival—he must always be hidden from their sight in order to help make certain that the world remains in Balance.” Rathma took a breath, then added, “As for me, my fate lies elsewhere, as I have known all along. I can say no more.”

It was hardly an answer to satisfy Mendeln, much less Uldyssian, but both had come to know that they would get no more from Rathma.

In fact, Uldyssian was clearly growing impatient to do something... *anything*. Mendeln had seen his brother like this on a few rare occasions and feared what would happen if they delayed further.

“All is not without hope,” he started to tell Uldyssian. “There is another who is even now—”

But he got no further. Uldyssian blurted, “Small wonder that Inarius and the demons have been able to play with our world for so long! You do nothing but interfere with those who’re no danger to you and stand idle against those most of a threat!”

Mendeln put a calming hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Uldyssian...”

But the older sibling ignored the younger. “Tell me, Rathma! Did we accomplish *anything* with the Worldstone? Has anything changed?”

“Most certainly, but how much must be deduced by careful observation—”

“I’ve observed enough! I—”

HOLD!

Although Trag’Oul’s outburst happened only within them, it was as if thunder had just exploded. Even Rathma clutched his head in pain from the loudness.

The angel is active.

Those words brought the three others to attention. Uldyssian glanced at Mendeln, who indicated he should instead study Rathma.

The pale figure was, if anything, more pale than ever. Yet it was not fear that Mendeln sensed in the other. Rather, he believed it something more akin to *resignation*.

“It is settled, then,” Rathma said.

That is your choice. I have always said that...

“No...it is my father’s choice...never mine...” Rathma eyed the two mortals. “But perhaps...perhaps I have been overanalyzing...

perhaps..." His narrow eyes narrowed further as they focused on Uldyssian.

Mendeln's brother *vanished*.

"What did you do?" Mendeln demanded. He could not sense Uldyssian anywhere.

"I sent him where he needed to be."

Loyalty stirred within the younger brother. "Then, I shall go with ___"

"No...I will need you for the confrontation." Rathma's resignation grew more pronounced. "I trust you've been educating him swiftly, Trag?"

As much as can be done. You are not bound to this...

"Aah, but I am. Come, Mendeln."

Well suspecting that he had no choice in the matter, Mendeln still wanted to know into what he was being forced. "And where do you take me when I would be at my brother's side? Where?"

Rathma spread his cloak wide, his look now that of death itself. "I would take you to the place I would rather be farthest from. I would—no—I *must*, I am sorry to say, bring you with me...to stand before my loving father..."

Uldyssian stood in the jungle.

At first, he welcomed the sight. Rathma had finally given in and sent him where he needed to be.

Then, Uldyssian noticed that he was once more missing Mendeln.

He shook a fist at the thick canopy above. "Damn you again, Rathma! You're no better than those you disclaim as your parents!"

But neither Lilith's son nor the great beast responded. Uldyssian concentrated on Mendeln, trying to first draw his brother to him, and then when that failed, attempting to return to the emptiness that was Trag'Oul's domain.

But still nothing happened.

Before he could consider what else to try, Uldyssian sensed something that completely took his attention from his brother.

Serenthia—Lilith—*both* of them—were nearby.

Aware that for the moment there was nothing that he could do for Mendeln, Uldyssian immediately focused on the new situation. Trust Rathma to throw him into the thick of things. Why was Lilith's son not here to deal with his mother? What could be more important than that?

But that could not be a concern for Uldyssian. What mattered at the moment was to make certain that the demoness did not sense his

presence. Throwing everything he could into shielding himself from her sight—and hoping that he knew what he was doing—Uldyssian cautiously moved on. If it was to be him alone against his former lover, then so be it. He would not let her continue her evil...

It was now nightfall, something that at first disconcerted him. Time in the dragon's realm seemed to pass oddly; he had expected it to be much earlier in the day. Still, the cover of darkness would surely assist Uldyssian, who wanted to stay out of sight of his followers until he could gauge what influence Lilith might have already had on them.

While it was tempting to confront her in front of the others, Uldyssian doubted that such a maneuver would work in his favor. With Lilith it was best to render her harmless first...somehow. Only then could he worry about the rest of the problem.

As he approached the encampment, it was evident that the ranks of the edyrem had swollen since Hashir, something that did not please Uldyssian as it might have once. Most of the newcomers would be of Lilith's making, although he wondered how she had accomplished that. The fact that the demoness had chosen him for her dupe had made him assume that she needed him to easier awaken the gifts within other humans, but the large number of new edyrem Uldyssian sensed gave the lie to that...so it seemed.

Uldyssian circled the area, surreptitiously seeking evidence of Lilith without her noticing him in turn. He did not have complete faith in his ability to stay hidden from her for very long.

The jungle sloped down, giving him at last a fairly good view of the main part of the encampment. He gazed with only the barest interest at the hodgepodge of tents, blankets, and lean-tos. Somehow, he doubted that Lilith would deign to sleep in one of those. Still, he knew that she had to be close—

A structure in the very midst of the edyrem made Uldyssian freeze. A large stone building illuminated by torches stood before him. At first he thought it some old hunter's lodge, but as Uldyssian eyed the building further, he noted more than just the sharply pointed door frame and the oddly angled roof. The fluted columns, the scrollwork on the door, they all added up to one thing. Albeit smaller and more ancient than any he had seen before, this was obviously some sort of temple.

Even as that registered, his eyes—augmented by him to see well in the night—caught sight of something that further chilled his blood.

There was a relief of Serenthia's face atop the entrance.

Her expression was that of a glorious and understanding goddess, not a human woman. Even though the face looked as if it had always been a part of the building, clearly it was new.

He understood immediately what it meant. Through Serenthia, Lilith was creating a cult focusing on her. In fact, although Uldyssian could not be entirely certain from his vantage point, it seemed that the more he studied Serenthia's face, the more there appeared subtle hints of another mixed with her features.

And then he recognized to whom they belonged. *Lilith*. It was obvious that she already intended to make herself their mistress in body as well as spirit. At some point, she could then cast off Serenthia's form, perhaps even return as "Lyliia" somehow.

Fighting his smoldering anger, Uldyssian wondered about the ancient temple. It could not be coincidence that had brought Lilith to it; she did not work that way. This structure had been her intended destination.

That realization further sent a chill running through Uldyssian. Something was to happen here, something integral to the demoness's desires...

Most of the edyrem began settling down for the night, no doubt exhausted from their arduous trek. There were more sentries than ever, far more than should have been warranted. More disturbing to Uldyssian was their manner, which seemed colder and wary of even their slumbering comrades. The guards were a mix of Parthans and lowlanders, some recognizable by face to him. Most were male, but a few women—equally dark of expression—also walked among them.

Even without trying, Uldyssian could sense a shadow over their souls, a taint that bespoke of Lilith.

Without warning, one of the sentries glanced in his direction. Biting back an epithet, Uldyssian strengthened his shield and backed deeper into the jungle. Frowning, the guard took a step toward his hiding place.

You see nothing, Uldyssian thought at the man. *Merely the jungle. It was all your imagination...*

He had never attempted to influence another in such a manner and hoped that by attempting to do so he did not give himself away. The sentry stood looking for a moment more...then grunted and returned to his post.

Slipping farther on, Uldyssian berated himself for his carelessness. He had come too close to revealing his presence...and to a guard. Had it been Lilith, surely Uldyssian would have been discovered.

Was Lilith inside the temple? Unable to sense her properly, Uldyssian could only assume so. Taking the utmost precautions, he tried harder to probe the structure.

Tried and quickly failed. There was a shroud of sorts around it, making whatever was going on inside undetectable by anyone, even

him. That only served to make Uldyssian even more anxious. What would Lilith desire so much to hide even as she insisted that it took place surrounded by those with the potential to sense it?

He feared he had some idea...and that forced a decision upon him. Lilith surely could not act until most of her “followers” were sleeping. If Uldyssian could reach the building undetected—

There was a sudden movement to his left. He barely secreted himself in time to avoid being seen by a figure passing by. Uldyssian caught his breath as he recognized the bald man striding at the edge of the camp.

Romus.

Uldyssian dared not let the moment slip away. Concentrating, the son of Diomedes reached out to the Parthan.

Romus smothered a gasp. With casual movements, he turned toward the jungle, then slipped out of sight of the camp.

A breath later, the two men faced one another. Romus could not hide his startlement. “Master Uldyssian? We thought you dead! Where were you?” He hesitated, then added, “It is you and not some phantom, yes?”

“It’s me. Praise be, Romus! You of all people I could use now!”

The former brigand blinked, then returned, “I am at your service, Master Uldyssian, surely!”

Nodding in gratitude, Uldyssian pulled his companion farther away from the camp. “First, I must know something, Romus...how did the edyrem fare in Hashir?”

“It was a bloody thing! The temple had magic and might greater than we could’ve imagined! Aye, there were some lost, Master Uldyssian, Tomo among them.”

Tomo. Uldyssian mourned all those slain, but he had come to know eager Tomo better than many. “How fares Saron?”

“He’s sworn to avenge his cousin’s death with a hundred of the Triune’s when next we come upon them...”

The blood kept flowing. Uldyssian blamed himself, but he also blamed beings like Lilith, Inarius, and Rathma for thinking so little of mortal life.

They would pay. They would all pay...with Lilith first.

That brought him back to another question that had to be answered quickly. “That ancient structure. How does it come to be that you’re all here, near it, and not on your way to the main temple?”

Romus’s face lit up. “’Twas Serenthia! She had a vision and saw this place! Such a new and wonderful power! Even you’ve never had that, have you, Master Uldyssian?”

“No.” Uldyssian doubted that *any* of the edyrem had experienced

such an ability or possibly ever would. “No...and I fear that neither has Serenthia.”

“What do you mean?”

“Romus, has she...has Serenthia seemed *different*?”

“Different?” The bald man shrugged. “When you vanished, she took up the struggle and saved many of us who might’ve joined Tomo! She brought *spirit* back to us, Master Uldyssian, when we thought you were no more!”

Lilith had done her work well, judging by Romus’s rapt expression and marveling tone. Uldyssian had returned just in time.

He took the man by the shoulders. Romus had come far from the disreputable figure that had watched him from far across the Parthan square. “Listen to me. Nothing is what it seems. You believe that Serenthia’s been guiding all of you since my disappearance—”

“Aye, of course—”

Vehemently shaking his head, Uldyssian went on, “You’re all being tricked, Romus! That is Serenthia in body in there, yes, but what you hear and see is the work of a demon, the sister of the foul Lucion! You know of whom I speak!”

The edyrem’s visage clouded. “You speak of Lilith, of whom we’ve all heard, aye. Can it be true that you’re saying Serenthia’s her in disguise! It can’t be!”

“She possesses Serenthia. Serenthia is there, deep in slumber. What you’ve seen, what you’ve experienced, I promise you, Romus, that the true Serenthia would have had nothing to do with it...”

“Nothing...aye...” Romus looked down in thought.

Uldyssian could not give him the luxury of digesting all of this. “Romus...Romus, is Serenthia inside that place?”

“Aye. She should be.”

“Do you know what she plans there?”

The edyrem shook his head. “Nay, but I and some others are to come to her near midnight. Ser—She says that there is a matter of import for us to discuss.”

“The sentries I saw. Have they had special contact with her?” After Romus nodded, Uldyssian explained, “We must be wary of them. They may be under her spell.”

“It’s to be us two alone, then, Master Uldyssian? You can be trusting in me!” Romus’s tone all but pleaded for Uldyssian to believe in him.

Uldyssian not only believed in him, but Romus, unfortunately, needed to play a pivotal role. He could still get near Lilith without being suspected. Uldyssian required the former brigand to distract Lilith enough so that he could then strike at her while her defenses

were down.

He explained such to Romus, then asked, if the man was still willing, what he knew of the building.

"Tis an old chapel or monk's abode, she said," Romus answered. "Serent—She told us that it was a sign that we were directed to it. Said it would mark the beginning of a turn for all of us..."

Again, Uldyssian felt a cold chill. "Would she see you before the time she requested?"

"I could find reason, Master Uldyssian." The Parthan shivered. "Poor Serenthia..."

"If you can keep the demoness from noticing, I'll make my way in. Then, you leave."

"But what about you?"

For what Uldyssian had in mind, he wanted no one else near. It was possible that forcing Lilith from Serenthia would wreak destruction on the immediate vicinity. "Just get as far away as possible. Understand?"

Romus reluctantly nodded. They talked over the details a minute or two more, then, with a short bow, he returned to the camp. Uldyssian had kept their plan as simple as possible, aware how even the slightest complications could worsen the situation several times over.

Romus did not immediately go to the temple. As dictated, he first found reason to speak with the nearest sentries and direct them elsewhere. Uldyssian did not wish to be forced to injure any of them simply because they had been entranced by Lilith.

By the time Romus had dealt with the guards, night had well established itself and from most corners of the encampment there came only silence. Many fires had all but died down. A few glow lights hovered around the area, a hint of the growing proficiency of the edyrem. Fortunately, most of the lights were dim, the better for their creators to sleep.

At last, Romus headed toward the ancient structure. The two edyrem standing duty hesitated only a moment before admitting him. As one of the most senior of Uldyssian's followers, Romus was probably now second in command. That made his inclusion in Uldyssian's plan invaluable.

The thick, wooden door creaked closed behind the bald man. Uldyssian counted under his breath, giving Romus time to establish his conversation with the false Serenthia. According to the Parthan, until tonight's impending gathering, she had intended to be alone.

Finally, Uldyssian deemed that enough time had passed. Any longer, and he risked Romus's life. There remained only the two guards, both of whom eyed the area before them with a distrust

amplified by Lilith's hold over them.

Not wishing to hurt anyone unnecessarily, Uldyssian concentrated on the two men, then slipped toward them. The guards continued to stare ahead. They now neither heard nor saw anything. Even when he hurried past them, they did not move.

There was no other entrance to the building—the only other openings being small air slits well above—but Romus had explained that there was an outer chamber before the one in which Lilith had arranged her sanctum. All Uldyssian needed to do was reach it. Then, there would be no more reason for stealth...only for swiftness. He would have one chance and one only.

At his direction, the door opened just enough to admit him. Uldyssian muffled any creak, lest the demoness be warned by even that.

The chamber he entered was utterly empty, whatever decor or artifacts likely long removed by thieves or the departing builders. Uldyssian cared not for what use the edifice had been, only that voices rose from the room beyond.

Romus's...and Serenthia's.

"...and yes, Romus, we'll soon be on our way to the Triune's main temple. I swore by Uldyssian's death that I'd complete his quest. First the Triune, and then, definitely, the Cathedral of Light...who may be an enemy worse than those we now fight."

"I apologize again," the Parthan responded to her. "But I, too, wish to fulfill Master Uldyssian's legacy. I thank you for reassuring me."

"Not at all. Is there anything else?"

Uldyssian dared risk Romus no longer. Aware that he also did not wish to harm Serenthia's body, the son of Diomedes threw all his will into repeating what he had done to the guards outside. He fixed on the feminine voice...

A silence enshrouded the building, a silence finally broken by a gasp from Romus. "Master Uldyssian! She does not move! She stands as if a statue!"

Uldyssian entered. The first thing he noted was Serenthia, as beautiful as he remembered her, poised like a goddess with one hand extended to Romus. A beguiling smile that had never been worn by the merchant's daughter gave ample proof that Lilith was in truth within the woman.

Then, a second, more awful sight behind her attracted his attention. An altar.

An altar stained by centuries-old blood.

He might have thought it merely macabre coincidence, but atop the gray, stone slab had been set a long dagger and a goblet. Worse, there

were also runes drawn on the stained surface, runes freshly made.

Tonight, the altar would have drunken for the first time in generations.

Despite the risk of Lilith escaping his power, Uldyssian could not help but look up. Above the altar, the face of whatever spirit or demon that had been carved there had been artfully replaced by that unsettling combination of the two females, with a bit more of Lilith recognizable.

“Master Uldyssian?”

Romus’s pensive voice finally brought him back to the present. The Parthan stepped back as Uldyssian faced the frozen figure.

Up close, Uldyssian could see the tiny hints that the woman with whom he had grown up was not truly there. Besides the smile, the eyes had a harsh cunning that he recognized too well.

“It’s over, Lilith...” he breathed. Uldyssian put his palms on the woman’s temples. He was not certain what he needed to do, but if he could reach Serenthia, somehow, he felt that she would help him force the demoness out. “It’s all over...”

Something hard cracked against the back of his head.

The world spun about. Through blurred eyes, he saw Romus leaning toward him, the Parthan with a fanatical expression and a heavy stone apparently taken from somewhere in the chamber in his hands. The fresh blood on one end of the stone belonged to Uldyssian.

“You’ll not harm my Lilith!” Romus snapped, his face twisting into something evil. “You’ll not!”

And as Uldyssian collapsed, he heard Serenthia’s voice...and Lilith’s all-too-familiar laugh.

“Well done, my love...just as we planned...”

Fifteen

Uldyssian awoke to find his limbs bound to the altar stone. That in itself was unnerving enough, but when he attempted to use his powers to free himself...nothing happened.

Then, he heard the familiar laugh again.

"My dear, dear sweet Uldyssian," Serenthia cooed. Only, it was not Serenthia, the son of Diomedes reminded himself, but Lilith. "So naive. So trusting."

A face appeared over him, but it was not the one that he expected. Rather, Romus glared down at his former friend. "You should've never come back, Master Uldyssian. Never."

"Romus! Are you mad? This is the demon, Lilith, here, not Serenthia!"

The Parthan shook his head. "No...you're wrong. It's both of them. My Serenthia and my Lilith. I've both of them..."

Footsteps presaged the appearance of the demoness. Brushing aside some of Serenthia's long, dark hair, she leaned lovingly against Romus's shoulder. "And I have *you*, dear Romus! How much more a loyal lover than you, Uldyssian, who could not see all that was offered! I could have been anyone you desired, including what you see...but you spurned my love and my offer..."

"All you wanted was a puppet to lead the creation of your magical army so that you could take Sanctuary from Inarius!" Uldyssian looked to Romus. "When she finds someone even more useful, you'll be tossed aside! Think, Romus! This isn't you! This isn't!"

"You know nothing of my life before your coming to Partha, Master Uldyssian! I answered to no one! I was feared by all! You took that away from me and made me one of your sheep! But she's reminded me of who I really am"—he leaned close, his eyes wide and deadly. His expression was manic—"and I adore her more for it!"

There was no hope talking to the Parthan. Lilith had completely seduced him, seeking deep within that lingering darkness that had once entirely engulfed Romus...and now did so again.

Uldyssian tried to pull his left hand free, but the bonds held. Romus smirked. Lilith pouted her lips in mock sorrow for their prisoner.

As Uldyssian fought for time and some manner of escape, he asked, "So, has she been using you to bring forth the new edyrem? That's all she really wants! She can't do it so quickly herself. It's the nature of

the gifts; they're a human thing and she's not, Romus!"

His words fell on deaf ears. "She chose me. She chose me from all of them because she saw how powerful I was and that I could be stirred from the illusions you cast upon us. Since, Hashiri, I've shown others, both new and old, the same, and each day, there's more." He grinned. "They treat me like a god..."

Lilith leaned close, first kissing Romus on the cheek, then licking it. He responded to her action like a cat, rubbing his face into hers. The scene sickened Uldyssian on more than one level; not only for Serenthia's sake, but the Parthan's, too. This was not the Romus he knew.

"And after tonight," the demoness murmured to Uldyssian as she continued her seduction, "they will *all* see the truth, dear Romus! Isn't that so?"

"Are you going to use *him*?" the former brigand eagerly asked.

She chuckled at his question. "Now *that* would be marvelous, but no. His blood would be no good. In fact, it might have the opposite effect, adding his taint. No...I need someone whose life force would magnify that which I desire, dear, sweet Romus...and there's truly only one person in my mind for that."

The Parthan suddenly gaped. His eyes widened even farther, to the point that they looked like those of a frog.

With a shiver, he slumped forward, sprawling over a stunned Uldyssian. As he did, his back became visible.

A long, crimson puddle oozed out of the wicked hole in his back.

Lilith held up the dagger that Uldyssian had noted before his betrayal. Romus's blood dribbled down the blade and over the hilt. Lilith paid no mind as red spots formed on her hand. Instead, she used her free hand to stroke the Parthan's bald head.

"He was a delight...I'm sure Serenthia enjoyed it, too. Pity he was so perfect for the role."

"You're mad, Lilith!"

Her expression tightened. "No...I am *justified*, dear Uldyssian! Justified! I saved the children and for that good deed I was cast out into emptiness! Inarius thought that I would *never* find my way back... but I did, I did!" She returned to caressing the dead Romus. "He was so determined to prove himself to me and her. He came right in and told me how you'd called him into the jungle and that he'd pretended to still be your friend!" Lilith smiled. "I will admit your timing startled me, my love. I smell another's work in that. Have you been talking to my darling Inarius? Hmm?"

Even though Uldyssian had more than once thought Rathma no better than his parents, something made him hold back from telling

the demoness the truth. "I had a short conversation with him. He misses you and begs your forgiveness. Then, he wants to kill you."

The face above him contorted into one that held no sanity whatsoever, a spectacle made all the more terrible by the fact that it was Serenthia's.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the madness once again vanished behind a mask of seduction. "Such a jest, dear, sweet Uldyssian! No, I don't believe that Inarius would ever have use for you! He thinks himself without flaw, and thus, in need of no one but himself to set things as he sees them!" Lilith grinned. "And so he shall sit oblivious on his throne even as the walls of his glittering cathedral come raining down around him!"

Uldyssian doubted that the angel would be so complacent, but Lilith clearly shared Inarius's megalomania. She could not imagine her plots unraveling, especially due to the interference of any mere mortal.

The trouble was, in that last case, it seemed that she was correct. Uldyssian could feel the power within him trying to burst free, but something held it in check. He could not sense any spell on him, but the work of the demoness could be very, very subtle.

"Still struggling," she commented. "How admirable is your determination...or is it that you just wish to one more time hold me in your arms?" Lilith leaned close enough to kiss him, and although once Uldyssian had wanted those lips against his, he was now revolted. Not for himself, however, but for Serenthia, whose body was now the demoness's plaything.

The lips moved to his ear, where Lilith whispered, "Not too long, my love, and you *will* hold me again. When I cast the spell using poor Romus's blood, you shan't be immune, either! You'll finally see matters as I desire, then..."

He wanted to spit in her face. "Why didn't you do this in the beginning?"

A throaty chuckle. "Because a dupe who thinks he is doing good is the best cover for my plan! But we've gone far past that point and you've gathered so many followers! When the opportunity arose, how could I resist? Now, you'll gather new converts knowing exactly what is demanded of them—allegiance to *me*!"

Uldyssian tried to grab her, but his struggles remained futile. Lilith laughed again and backed up the better to admire his efforts. She brushed against Romus's body, still half-sprawled over her prisoner.

With a weak growl, the Parthan abruptly pushed himself up. He grabbed Lilith by the arm that held the dagger. Blood splattered on Uldyssian.

Any hope by Uldyssian that the Parthan's startling act would save both of them quickly died as the demoness twisted around and grabbed Romus by the throat. To his credit, the former brigand, his eyes bearing none of the fanaticism of her control, tried to burn her with his power. His hands glowed bright and smoke arose where they touched Lilith.

But she only laughed, and with one squeeze of her hand, *crushed* in his windpipe.

Already suffering a massive wound, Romus perished instantly. This time, Lilith let his still form collapse on the stone floor.

Both hands now awash in the Parthan's life fluids, she turned back to Uldyssian. Her ghastly smile made even Serenthia's countenance too terrible for Uldyssian to behold and he turned his gaze away.

"Such strong life! Yes, poor Romus's blood will do spectacularly, my love." Moist fingers forced his gaze back to her. "Don't you think?"

When Uldyssian only glared, she patted his cheek—leaving more of the Parthan's blood—and laughed again.

At that moment, Uldyssian sensed someone else in the chamber. He had no hope, though, that it was someone who had come to help him and sure enough the newcomer turned out to be one of the guards that he had earlier frozen.

The edyrem eyed Uldyssian like a vermin discovered in his food.

"The others are here, Mistress Serenthia." He seemed unsurprised to find Romus's body.

"They may enter. Then you and your friend keep the doorway sealed until I am done."

The guard nodded, then vanished through the entrance.

Lilith stood over the Parthan as she spoke to Uldyssian. "You've no idea how many there were so easily turned to my desire, dear love! You were so gracious, accepting all who came to embrace what you offered, but even though your will buried what they were, it did not erase it. Turning them was even more simple than Romus here." Dagger still in hand, she performed a mock curtsy. "For arranging things so well for me, I thank you!"

Still attempting to stall, Uldyssian looked around again. Despite there being only signs of Lilith in the chamber, he suspected that once the walls had been covered with markings dedicated to beings equally vile. "What is it about this place? You sought it out."

"This? This place is a nexus, my love, important to the making of Sanctuary, all those centuries ago! Here was set one of the first points of reality—you might say hammered down—that allowed this world to hold together! There is power beyond belief here, the contribution of every angel and demon who built this refuge, including *him*. So

strong are the forces inherent here that you see that even your kind sensed them and built this.” Indicating herself, she merrily added, “And this...more than three of your lifetimes ago...is where I found my way back to Sanctuary!”

It startled him to hear that Lilith had been in his world for that long without ever being noticed. That raised anew his fear that the demoness just might be able to accomplish all that she planned. If even the angel who had cast her out had not sensed her in all this time...

But before he could discover more, Lilith’s turned edyrem began filtering inside. So many of the faces—male and female—were known well to Uldyssian, which pained him further. He saw both Parthans and Torajians and assumed that a few Hashiri were also among the gathering. All told, there were at least a couple dozen.

“Stand along the edge of the room,” Lilith commanded.

Uldyssian used her distraction to try one last time to free himself. He had little hope of success, but could not bring himself to merely accept what appeared inevitable—

Then, to his surprise, he sensed the magical forces binding him weaken in a few places. Managing to cover his pleasure at this, he focused on those points...and then noticed that they were where Romus’s blood had splattered him.

Cautiously, Uldyssian sought to exploit them. He worked at the spell holding him, gradually feeling it unravel here and there.

But the effort went too slow. Lilith already had most of her pawns in place for whatever ceremony she had planned and now the demoness again positioned herself above the dead Parthan.

From her lips erupted sounds that no mortal creature could utter. They were evidently words of power, for he sensed the chamber immediately fill with invisible but potent forces rising from deep beneath.

Something else rose...blood from Romus’s wounds. It streamed up into the air, reaching at last the dagger. This time, Lilith desired far more than just enough to cover the blade; Uldyssian suspected that she would drain the corpse completely before her task was finished.

As she did this, her edyrem turned their palms up. Energies from within each sparked to life over the palms. The edyrem moved with such perfect coordination that he wondered if Lilith now utterly controlled them.

He felt her spell upon him fade more, yet still not enough to enable him to fight her, much less her followers, too. Time was against him. Lilith was nearly done with her grisly task.

At last, she held up for all to see the insidious dagger. Even though

it was drenched in blood, there should have been far more of the crimson fluid present. Uldyssian did not want to even think where the rest had gone.

The binding spell continued to weaken. All he needed was a minute or two longer...

But it seemed that Lilith had no intention of giving that to him. She strode to where he lay, paying no mind to the droplets left in her wake.

"Now it begins, my love," she whispered, reaching to the side to take the goblet. "Retribution begins..."

Her mouth contorted as out of it again issued those inhuman sounds—

One of the edyrem let out a cry and fell back.

Uldyssian at first thought it Lilith's doing, that she had intended from the start to use her other puppets as she had Romus, but then he saw that which had slain the man.

An arrow through the throat. An arrow encrusted in dirt.

Before the first body stilled, a second follower also collapsed, a shaft through his chest exactly where the heart was located.

Lilith's followers broke ranks as some sought shelter while others looked for the source of the seemingly magical bolts. Uldyssian was the first to recognize their point of origin, the narrow slits above. How the archer had managed to avoid the guards outside or to be sensed by Lilith was a much more major question.

But the answer to that was something with which he could concern himself later...if possible. The momentary interruption had given him the time that he needed to at last extinguish the spell keeping him bound and helpless.

One of the nearest edyrem saw him rise. The dark-skinned figure started to point at Uldyssian, but the latter, not needing to focus, sent his would-be attacker flying up into the wall. Uldyssian then glared at two more just registering his freedom. They suddenly flung against one another with such force that both were knocked unconscious.

Another of Lilith's followers screamed. The arrow that had slain him stuck out of his back, which meant that it had come from another direction. Whether that meant more than one bowman, Uldyssian had no chance to consider, for Lilith, face monstrosly contorted, had resumed her chanting. Uldyssian could only assume that meant that she still had hope of fulfilling her plan and turning the rest of the edyrem to her cause.

Whatever the cost, he could not let that happen. The chamber shook as pure force radiated from him in every direction. Edyrem went tumbling, some crashing into each other and into walls.

Uldyssian did not care if they lived or died, for they had likely been forever tainted by Lilith. What was important was saving all the rest.

Lilith, too, had been thrown back by his brutal assault. But as he leapt off the altar, he saw her rise. Serenthia's blood dripped from a wound near the mouth and a dark bruise discolored the forehead.

Unfortunately, the demoness was far from defeated. She raised the dagger as if to throw it, but instead uttered another of the incomprehensible words. Uldyssian swore, fearing that Lilith had yet succeeded...

To his shock, though, it was her followers who cried out, then fell still all around them. Uldyssian sensed Lilith quickly draw something from them into herself.

"My foolish, foolish love..." the demoness rasped as she stood up. "Always a little shortsighted. Always not doing quite enough. From these I'll still have my way with but a moment more. You can't stand against me enough to keep me from taking the rest of your precious flock with what I've grasped from these fools! A greater sacrifice than I planned, but their loss is paltry compared to what I gain!"

He did not speak, answering instead with a force that should have pounded her to the ground. However, although she shook, Lilith remained standing.

They both knew the reason why. As much as he wanted to, Uldyssian could not bring himself to slay Serenthia, the only certain method to stop the creature possessing her body. That hesitation meant that, despite the shift in circumstances, Lilith would still in the end win.

And Sanctuary would surely be doomed.

"Poor, sweet darling," she cooed. "Always seizing failure at the moment of victory! Still, I promise you some delights with this body, once I've made you mine again..."

Something struck the blade of the dagger with such force that it ripped the weapon from the distracted demoness's grip. Blood splattered the area around Lilith as the dagger and what had hit it clattered against the back wall.

And as both pieces stilled, Uldyssian saw that what lay near the dagger was another arrow...again covered in dirt.

"Serenthia..." a voice called from the entranceway, a voice that despite its grating, was so familiar to Uldyssian that it made the hair on his neck stiffen. "Serenthia..." it called again, closer now. "Come back...to us...to me..."

Despite Lilith still free, Uldyssian had to turn to the newcomer, had to see if he was dreaming...or living a new nightmare.

It was Achilios...Achilios, who was very dead.

The hunter's too pale eyes gazed only momentarily at Uldyssian, as if just to acknowledge that the latter saw the truth. Then, Achilios, bow drawn for another shot, continued forward. Behind him, he left a trail of slightly moist dirt, the same which seemed to cover much of his form.

"Serenthia..." the dead man repeated. What little remained of his ruined throat twisted and shifted as if actually drawing the breath needed for speech. "You can...hear me...you...know me..."

Lilith had been oddly silent, but now she snapped, "There is only Lilith, dear decrepit Achilios! My! Love can be foolishly strong, can it not?" She spread her arms. "Would you like me to warm you for her, archer?"

"Spare...spare me...your pathetic...seductions," Achilios replied, raising the bow to fire. "If I...can't...free her one way...I'll free her...another...she would...want that..."

"And perhaps when she, too, is dead, you'll have the chance to win her again? How macabre and wonderful at the same time!" She leaned so that he had a clear shot at her breast. "Fire, then!"

But Achilios did not rise to her bait. "When I am...ready, witch...first...I still want...her...to come to us..."

Seeing that Lilith was focused on the walking corpse, Uldyssian readied his own attack. However, Achilios shook his head.

"No...this is not for you to...do..."

There was that in the rasping voice that made Uldyssian listen. He watched as the archer lowered the bow.

"Serenthia..." Achilios murmured. "Serenthia...please awaken..."

Lilith stood as if frozen. Uldyssian thought that she planned some new mischief, but then the demoness's hands clutched at her throat as if to choke herself.

She screamed. She screamed so loud and with such raw agony that it would not have surprised the son of Diomedes to see the rest of the dead in the chamber rise up to join Achilios. Lilith screamed without pause, the very building shaking from her effort.

And then...and then...something monstrous emerged from her upturned mouth. They initially looked like a pit of small serpents, but Uldyssian finally recognized them as *fingers*. Taloned fingers.

Serenthia's face distorted, her mouth growing twice, then three times the size of her head. The hands pushed it wider, wider...and only then did it become apparent that the scream was issuing forth from whatever was emerging, not from the woman before them.

Fearing for the merchant's daughter, Uldyssian started forward, but again the archer forbade him. "Do not...do not stop this...if we are...to have any hope...for Serenthia..."

If it had been any other—no, if it had even been a *living* Achilios—Uldyssian would have paid the command no heed. Yet, somehow, he realized that his dead comrade understood the matter more than he could ever begin to. Nerves taut, Uldyssian forced himself to watch things unfold.

A grotesque array of red quills erupted from Serenthia's monstrous maw. They pushed upward. Upward...

And with one terrible push, the demoness Lilith burst full-blown out of the dark-haired woman's mouth.

Still screaming—but from what seemed more rage than pain—the green-scaled siren flew around the chamber several times. Below, Serenthia—now normal again—teetered dangerously.

"Fools!" bellowed Lilith, suddenly hovering. "Little-minded mortal fools! Do you think this means *anything*? Do you think you've won at all?" She laughed wildly, then thrust a taloned finger toward Serenthia. "Careful, dears! She's about to drop!"

With that, the demon flew up to the ceiling, vanishing just before she would have crashed into it.

Neither Uldyssian nor Achilios dared watch to see if this were another trick, for Lilith had at least spoken true when she had warned them about Serenthia. Nearly as pale as the archer, Serenthia let out a slight gasp, then fell over.

Uldyssian intended to use his abilities to keep her from striking the stones headfirst, but somehow Achilios moved even faster. Gritty arms caught Serenthia mere inches from disaster. The archer gently set her down as if she were made of fragile glass.

Serenthia exhaled...and her eyes fluttered open. She gazed up at her savior, who himself looked to Uldyssian as if he suddenly wished that he were anywhere else at the moment rather than in her sight. The archer quickly put one hand over his throat in a futile attempt to cover the monstrous sight.

"A-Achilios..." she mumbled. "Achilios..." A smile started to spread, but before it could go very far...Serenthia passed out.

"Praise...be..." muttered the dead man. He stepped back from her, only then looking at Uldyssian.

The son of Diomedes could still not believe what he was seeing. "Achilios—"

"Take...take better care...of her...next time...if only so I won't...be back..."

The archer turned to flee, but Uldyssian seized him by the arm. Ignoring both the dirt and the cold he felt, Uldyssian growled, "You can't leave!"

This brought a harsh laugh from the dead man. "And...how could

I...remain?"

Before Uldyssian could answer, yet another scream resounded in the ancient structure. Both looked to the entrance...where, unnoticed in the heat of things, a crowd of startled edyrem had gathered.

A crowd now seeing their mistress as still as death, their master returned as if from the dead...and a man the Parthans in the group knew had been slaughtered by a demon.

Sixteen

Mendeln had never stood atop a mountain before.

He did not like it in the least.

The wind howled and snow covered everything. However, nothing, not even the chill air, really touched him much. He supposed that he had Rathma to thank for that, if gratitude was the proper emotion for being dragged off to this desolate spot to face a figure whose very name filled Uldyssian's brother with dread.

"And what assistance am I to be against an angel?" he asked not for the first time. Mendeln had to raise his voice to be heard over the wind.

"Whatever it turns out you can supply," was Rathma's response, the same one he had used to answer the prior questions.

Mendeln folded his arms tight, if only out of habit, not from being cold. "Where are we?"

"Near where I brought your brother. Near to the vicinity of the Worldstone."

What little Mendeln had learned of this "Worldstone" had filled him with new awe and not a little uncertainty. To have created such a thing, the angels and demons must have utilized fantastic magic and energy.

He was about to ask Rathma another question when the ancient nephalem raised a hand to cut him off.

"My father approaches. Be wary."

To Mendeln, it was an unnecessary warning. How could he deal with the arrival of an angry angel with anything but wariness?

The wind suddenly picked up, so ferocious now that it nearly shoved Mendeln from his position. He did not like the thought of tumbling down the mountainside, no matter what he had learned from the dragon and his companion about the many states of life. At the moment, Mendeln still preferred the "living" stage too much to abandon it just yet.

The snow also increased. A storm raged about them. Rathma pulled free his dagger and muttered something, but the storm remained intense.

Then, an ear-splitting thunderclap shook them further, a thunderclap immediately followed by dead silence. If not for being able to hear his own breathing, Mendeln would have believed himself

now deaf.

And then he noticed in their midst a golden-haired youth.

"I am disappointed in you, my son," the robed figure stated in a voice of pure music.

"As you ever have been since my birth, my father," Rathma replied, his generally bland tone with a hint of an edge in it.

The newcomer looked away from the pair, instead seeming more interested in the general landscape. "And have you seen your mother of late?"

"No. I have been fortunate in that regard. I wish I could say the same concerning *you*."

Now Rathma had his attention again. "Your insolence is unbecoming. Be grateful that I have not deigned to punish you for your past sins."

Mendeln watched the pair, still uncertain, despite what he had heard, that this was indeed Inarius. He knew that the angel was master of the Cathedral of Light and had heard of the Prophet's general description, but to actually see the young figure was disconcerting, to say the least.

As if sensing this, Inarius turned his gaze to the human. Suddenly, Mendeln had no more doubts. The eyes were enough to stop him in his tracks. He could not even say what color they were, just that to have them look his way made Mendeln almost wish to drop down on his knees in worship. That made him again wonder just how much help he would actually be, should Rathma truly need him. If he was this weak merely because of a *look*...

To his surprise, a slight chuckle escaped Rathma. "Not so insignificant, are they?"

"And that may be their downfall," returned the angel coldly. "You and your kind had no place here. Nor do these. If they cannot be contained, they must be removed..." He turned from them as if they were nothing to him. His sandaled feet left no impressions in the snow. "Sanctuary must be purified..."

Rathma was uncharacteristically emotional. "For *who*, Inarius? For who? All there would be then is you! Must all else in this world bend to your will or be expunged for their defiance?"

"They exist by my will, therefore, yes..." The Prophet turned to them again. As he did, Mendeln noticed that he momentarily left the edge of the mountaintop, yet did not fall. "This is a debate we have had before, Linarian..."

Rathma pulled his cloak tight around him. "That name I have rejected, as I have you and my mother."

The Prophet shrugged. He glanced briefly at Mendeln, then again at

his son. Without warning, Inarius suddenly said, “You know why I am here.”

“Of course.”

“You were forbidden.”

“Fate decreed otherwise,” Rathma returned.

The angel spread his arms and his face contorted. His hair stood on edge and he grew larger and larger. Fire radiated around him. “I am Fate here. I am the yea or nay for all that exists in Sanctuary—”

“Beware!” Mendeln’s companion warned, not that Uldyssian’s brother needed to be alerted. The son of Diomedes drew his own dagger, a thing seemingly so insignificant in the sight of Inarius’s abrupt and staggering transformation.

I AM THE ULTIMATE JUDGE OF WHAT IS AND WHAT SHALL BE! declared the angel, his mouth no longer moving. The words struck Mendeln much as Trag’Oul’s had, but without the dragon’s consideration for their effect on a mortal body and mind. It was a struggle to maintain his stance, but Mendeln knew he dared not falter.

From the angel’s back burst what at first Mendeln took for magnificent, fiery wings. Yet as they spread wide, he saw that they were more astounding than even that. The wings—so different from the feathered ones that Mendeln had most of his life imagined on angels—were actually *strands of light* that moved almost as if with animation of their own. They writhed and shifted like serpents or tentacles, a very contrary suggestion to what the angel represented. Inarius’s body and face contorted. A breastplate formed over his torso. The handsome, youthful visage sank into darkness beneath an immaculate hood, once within, finally transforming completely into shadow. It was as if there was no true physical substance to him. All vestiges of Humanity vanished as a heavenly warrior suddenly hovered beyond the mountain’s edge, one gleaming, gauntleted hand pointing accusingly at the angel’s rebellious offspring.

I SPOKE WITH YOU OUT OF MEMORY, BUT THAT TIME IS PAST FOREVER NOW! YOU WISH LINARIAN DEAD, THEN SO BE IT! THERE IS NO TIE BETWEEN US!

“Was there *ever*?” Rathma shouted back, ivory dagger held before him like the strongest of shields. Mendeln followed suit, hoping that it was not a futile gesture.

*THE STONE AWAITS ME...*Inarius gestured. *AND I AM DONE WITH YOU!*

The mountaintop exploded.

The force unleashed by the angel ripped up snow, ice, and rock in great chunks. Mendeln expected to be tossed away with them, but for the moment, the area around him and Rathma remained intact. Not

much else did, however. Dirt and snow flew everywhere and Mendeln likely would have been crushed if his own weapon had not suddenly emitted a pale light that now enveloped him. He glanced at his companion and saw that Rathma was likewise protected.

But with rock and snow crashing about him, Mendeln did not know how much longer the two would be safe. Above them, Inarius pointed with his other hand—and Mendeln felt the ground beneath him collapse.

“Remember what you have been shown!” shouted Rathma.

But all Mendeln could think about was that he no longer had any footing. His fear of falling had at last become a reality. Rathma vanished from his sight, the other’s footing also torn out from under him.

As he fell, Mendeln caught sight of Inarius, the angel watching the destruction with what could only be called detachment. Even his own offspring was of no consequence to the winged being. After all, Rathma had committed the ultimate sin; he had defied his father.

Clutching the dagger tight, Mendeln sought some way to save himself. Then, a hand clutched his collar, slowing his descent. He knew instantly that it was Rathma.

As the avalanche continued, Rathma set him down on a small outcropping still holding. The shrouded figure then alighted next to him.

“This is not over!” he called.

Not at all surprised, Mendeln prepared himself for the worst. Inarius would not leave this task incomplete.

And sure enough, the winged warrior fluttered into sight. Inarius—his face more of a brilliant armored mask—inspected the two.

Mendeln felt the angel focus on him. He prepared for the end—

WHAT HAS HE DONE? demanded Inarius. *WHAT HAS HE DONE... AND HOW?*

Only after a moment did Mendeln realize that Inarius spoke of *Uldyssian*. He had no idea just what about his sibling so concerned the angel, but suddenly feared anew for Uldyssian’s life.

WHAT HAS HE DONE? Inarius repeated. *WHAT HAS HE DONE TO THE STONE?*

From behind Mendeln, Rathma shouted, “He has done the undoable, Inarius! He has done the undoable!”

The angel hovered in silence for a moment. He started to gesture at the pair, then lowered his hand. *THEN...HE MAY HAVE CONDEMNED YOU ALL...*

And with that, the winged being soared high into the sky, dwindling to a dot in less time than Mendeln could count to the

number one. Then, in a flash of light so brilliant it momentarily blinded the human...Inarius disappeared.

The devastation wrought by Rathma's father—so *easily*, Mendeln dourly thought—began to settle around them. The entire top of the peak had been radically altered. Now, it looked as if the mountain had grown a giant, three-fingered paw with jagged claws on two of the digits. He and Rathma stood on the outer edge of the third, a drop of well over a thousand feet merely one step away.

One question burned to be spoken by Mendeln. “Why do we live? We were clearly nothing to him, whatever your beliefs before we came here! Why do we live?”

“We were not nothing to him, son of Diomedes,” the ancient figure responded, dusting off bits of dirt and snow. “If we had been, we would have been dead without ever knowing he had arrived. It is because of what we—and your brother most of all—represent, that my dear father paused to speak at all. Certainly not for me alone, as we have spoken all we can, lo, these many centuries past. He also came in part out of curiosity surrounding you, Mendeln ul-Diomed, and what a jest it was when he found that he could not bend your knee to him...”

“Could not—” Mendeln felt queasy in his stomach. He had *defied* the angel's will?

“Did you not know that? I thought you aware.”

Seeking not to think about the subject anymore, Mendeln asked, “What is it that he kept mentioning? Did I hear him say the *Worldstone*? I know that it was mentioned by you or Uldyssian when the pair of you returned, but I never understood completely about it! Just what did Uldyssian do that so—so—*shocked*—him?”

Rathma's expression darkened. “That will take a bit more explaining. Suffice to say, we are near that which is vital to the conclusion—whatever that conclusion will be—of our struggle. The Worldstone is a thing that only one like my father should be able to alter in even the least way—and, therefore, could my mother—yet your brother did just that! The Worldstone is different now, in even a manner Inarius cannot believe, hence his reaction.”

At first, Mendeln took hope from this, but then he recalled the angel's parting words. *Then, he may have condemned you all...*

Mendeln surveyed what even the least of Inarius's fury had done to a gigantic mountaintop and shuddered. “Rathma, what does he mean by his last?”

Lilith's son held his dagger high, as if using it to search for something. Mendeln waited impatiently as the tall figure first turned in a circle, then replaced the otherworldly weapon in the vast confines of his cloak.

“What he means has to do with the same reason that we, who could not make the stand that I hoped—and evidently did not need to since Inarius made no adjustment to the stone that I can divine—are still alive. Why should he bother with two paltry deaths when, if he reaches the conclusion to which I sense he is leaning, he will then remove *everything* at once and start his Sanctuary anew?”

Only now did Mendeln truly grasp what he realized Rathma and Trag’Oul had been saying all along. “Rather than...rather than allowing Lilith...or humans...to act beyond his dictates...you are saying that the angel could...would utterly destroy our world?”

“And then build anew to suit his megalomania, yes.”

Mendeln could not even imagine such power in one being’s control. “He can...do this?”

“He can.” Rathma began drawing a circle in the air, a circle that expanded instantly. As it did, Mendeln saw that within it was utter darkness...the path, he knew, to Trag’Oul’s realm. “He has that power...” the angel’s son continued, sounding for the first time very, very weary. “He has that power a thousand times over...and will be more than willing to use it...”

Lilith materialized on the throne, her image only briefly that of herself before she cast the illusion of the Primus over her. The demoness sat in the darkness, utterly silent. Had any been there and able to gaze upon the face she now wore, they would have come away unable to read the emotions coursing through her.

After several minutes, she suddenly rose and departed the Primus’s personal chambers. The guards outside jolted to attention. Although they had been at their positions as demanded, they had assumed—rightly—that their master had *not* been inside. Still, none questioned this miraculous appearance...for this *was* the Primus, after all.

At least, to their eyes.

Lilith remained expressionless as she strode throughout the vast temple. There seemed no rhyme or reason to her path. Priests, guards, novices, and other acolytes paid homage to her along the way, each seeming to try to bow or kneel lower than those before.

Then, in the great hall where the statues of Mefis, Dialon, and Bala stood, she paused. Around her, more of the faithful hesitated in their own tasks, cautiously wondering just what the Primus did.

She looked up at each of the statues...her eyes lingering longest on that of Mefis.

And then...after staring at the spirit’s vaguely crafted visage, Lilith allowed the Primus’s own to smile ever so slightly.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Yes, that’ll be the way of it. Oh, yes...”

One of the more daring priests stepped up to her. Hands clasped together and head low, he said, “Great Primus, is there any service I may be to you?”

Lilith glanced at him, noting his youth and good build, not to mention the fact that he had been the only one with backbone enough to approach her. “Tell me...what is your name again, my son?”

“Durram, Great Primus.” He wore the robe of a devotee of Dialon and she already sensed that the darkness of the Lord of Terror had touched Durram despite his humble facade. He was ambitious.

“I will summon you to my chambers later to speak with you,” she told him, forcing herself not to give him a beguiling smile. Lilith had a need to burn off certain frustrations and Durram looked just perfect for the task, not that he would know until it was too late.

The priest bowed lower than any of the others. Inside, the demoness sensed he was congratulating himself on his daring. She wondered how he would feel after their “discussion.”

But minor pleasures had to be pushed aside for the moment. Having come to a decision, Lilith was eager to implement it. Once again, the proverbial closing of one door had led to another opening.

“I must go,” she informed Durram.

“I will await your summons, Great Primus.”

Lilith could not forgo a brief feminine chuckle, but Durram did not hear it. As she passed the bowing priest, she blithely commented, “Durram. Clear the vicinity. An accident is about to happen.”

To his credit, Durram was quick to obey. As he shouted the warning, Lilith strode off. She waited until she had reached the corridor leading back to the Primus’s chambers, then glanced over her shoulder.

There was a resounding crack—and the statue of Mefis suddenly toppled from its high perch.

Had it fallen moments earlier, at least a score of humans would have been crushed or badly injured. As it was, the statue’s collision with the marble floor sent huge chunks flying in every direction. Durram had done well in directing the others away, but a few were still within range of the deadly missiles.

The demoness gestured—making certain that some of the guards and others nearby noticed—and those who were about to be struck were saved. The pieces turned to light ash, then faded, not even leaving a trace upon their supposed victims.

The dust began to settle. To one of the guards, Lilith commanded, “All are well. It remains only to clear the rubble. The priest Durram will oversee it.”

The awed guard nodded. "Yes, Great Primus!"

"I must go and meditate on this event...and consider what form the new image of Mefis must take."

No one questioned her. In fact, she knew that word was already spreading—with Durram's aid—of the Primus's holy warning that had saved so many. Once again, they had witnessed a miracle.

But Lilith had not warned them for their sake. After all, she had been the cause of the statue's collapse. She had been simply reassuring the Primus's grand status in the temple, for what she planned soon would push these humans to the limits of their wills...and likely cost many their lives. Of course, as they would have willingly given those lives for their Primus and she was now *him*, that was a negligible point.

The demoness took one last look at the statue. Turning from her followers, she allowed herself a slight smirk, then whispered, "So sorry, Father..."

The Prime Evils—especially Mephisto—would be helpless to do anything against her. They so feared the High Heavens discovering Sanctuary that they would let it fall into her claws. No doubt they would think that they could retake it later, but Lilith understood the Worldstone well enough to make that an impossibility. With a world of suddenly vibrant nephalem at her command, the demon lords would discover that they had best worry about saving their *own* realm.

Yes, first the Burning Hells and then the High Heavens.

That made her think of Inarius, always skulking about. She knew his weaknesses as well. There was nothing to fear from him...

Still clad as the Primus, she returned to the darkened chambers. Once there, she paused. Despite the lack of light, the demoness could sense traces of webbing in the room. Someone had been here during her absence, someone who should have known better. She had actually noted some of the traces earlier, but her mind had been concerned with weightier matters. Now, though...

"Astrogha!" Lilith called in Lucion's powerful voice. "Get in here, you damned spider!"

"This one is here," retorted the arachnid a breath later from the shadows above. "What is it the great Lucion wants?"

There was a change in the other demon's tone that Lilith did not appreciate, a defiance. "You have been misbehaving. You have been masquerading."

"This one has been taking up the mantle that the great Lucion has forgone too much of late...so much so, in fact, that *others* insisted that Astrogha fill the void."

She knew exactly what the spider had been up to. Lilith was

concerned with only one thing, even more so considering the shift in the other demon's mood. Astrogha represented the only impediment still existing in the Triune. It had been the demoness's hope that Uldyssian would have removed him at the same time as he had the foolish Gulag, but Astrogha had proven wiler.

"And filled it like a rabbit pretending to be a lion. There were plans in place that Astrogha did not need to know, but that his interference utterly disrupted! How would the Three consider *that*?"

There was shuffling from the shadows. Glimpses of the other demon became apparent. "That, a fair question might be, great Lucion...a question this one would not be above asking himself to them..."

Which meant that Astrogha had already survived interrogation by one of the Prime Evils, no doubt his own lord and master, Diablo.

"There can be only one Primus, one master of the Cult of the Three, spider..."

"Yesss...this one agrees...and only awaited your return to resolve that...*Lilith*."

True spiders did not spit webbing from their mouths, but, then, Astrogha's form was but an aspect. He was no more truly one of the eight-legged creatures than Lilith had been Lylia.

The foul spray spread over the dark chamber, Astrogha seeking to assure that there would be no chance of missing his prey. When he had divined that Lilith had taken her brother's place, the demoness did not know nor did she care. She had even expected this possible scenario...and so, before the webbing could engulf her, created a green inferno that burned away the other demon's attack. Sharp hissing accompanied the destruction of the webbing—

But Astrogha, too, had evidently assumed removing her would demand more effort, for suddenly there were spiders *everywhere*. Even Lilith could not evade them all. They bit her wherever they could, spilling into her Astrogha's foul venom. The arachnid had learned the need for haste from his experience with the mortal, Uldyssian, but he still forgot that he dealt with no ordinary demon. This was the daughter of Mephisto...

With but a thought, Lilith pushed the surge of venom back into each of the spiders, then added her own to the mix. The sinister creatures began tumbling off her body in great numbers.

Astrogha hissed angrily and another wave of webbing shot forth, this time snaring Lilith's right side. However, suddenly appearing as herself, she laughed and sliced away the sticky substance with the claws of her left hand.

"I find the best way to rid a place of vermin is to burn them out," she mocked. "Don't you agree?"

The demoness snared one of the fallen tendrils. The end burst into green flames which raced up toward the shadowed Astrogha, at last revealing his macabre form to her.

Astrogha hissed and spat, seeking to douse the unnatural flames. His webbing only fueled Lilith's fire, though, and in seconds he was surrounded by it.

"This one will devour your flesh and drink your soul," he snarled. The arachnid's multiple eyes flared crimson.

Lilith faltered. There was a new presence in the chamber, one she knew too well. She almost turned to look behind her...then stopped.

"When next you seek to remind me of my father," she cooed, "you had best be certain you bring the real thing, not some desperate illusion, servant of Diablo..."

Lilith magnified the flames. Astrogha shrieked as they licked at his hairy form.

"You are a fool, Mephisto's daughter!" he declared, pulling back as best he could. "And therefore welcome to this fool's nest forged by Lucion! Savor it...for what little time remains..."

A new and utter blackness enshrouded the spider. Lilith willed the flames forward...but when they reached the corner, there was no longer any Astrogha.

With her mind, she searched the whole of the temple, but found no trace. Astrogha had not merely fled to safety; he had fled the Triune entirely. Lilith was not overly concerned; she should have slain Diablo's servant, but he clearly would be of no consequence, anymore. Now the Cult of the Three completely belonged to her.

No, Lilith thought with a smile as she dismissed the remnants of the struggle to oblivion and once more, as the Primus, assumed her place on the throne. *No longer the Cult of the Three. There is only One. There is only Me.*

Feeling quite pleased with herself, she had a sudden desire for the priest Durram's company. There was time enough for a little entertainment before she dealt with dear Uldyssian. He had forced her to a decision that, in retrospect, would accelerate her dreams to fulfillment. All she needed were a few morlu...

Lilith giggled at her own thought. Perhaps more than *few*...

Astrogha had no regrets about fleeing the temple. He had not expected to be able to defeat the daughter of a Prime Evil, although his effort had allowed him to gauge her for another possible confrontation. She was welcome to the Triune and she and the mortal, Uldyssian, were welcome to the other. Astrogha had not outlived other demons by not

knowing when it was best to let others deal with his problems. Let them battle it out, perhaps with the angel, Inarius, also throwing himself into the mix. The survivors—should there be any—would find themselves weakened, of that he was certain. Then...then the spider would pick up the pieces. The notion of a cult such as the Triune still made sense, but one more focused. On himself perhaps.

Yes, Astrogha *liked* that thought. From the ruins of this debacle, he would gather humans of his own. There were always those with an almost demonic lust for power. Unlike Lucion, though, Astrogha would maintain tight control over his minions. That had been the trouble; Lucion had lost order, had allowed himself to rely too much on others. Then, when he had finally taken personal control, something had obviously gone wrong. The son of Mephisto had somehow perished.

No, Astrogha would not make Lucion's mistakes, nor Lilith's. Already he could imagine his slaves spreading out to both sides of the world, his symbol—the spider—raised over city after city. There would come the day when no one would recall the Triune or the Cathedral of Light. It would be the cult of Astrogha that finally *conquered* Sanctuary and made humans its slaves...all for the Prime Evils, of course, and especially, his master.

All for them...eventually...

Seventeen

Although given only an instant, Uldyssian yet managed to devise a plan to readily explain the scene before his followers. Most of it involved the truth, the rest a necessary twisting of it.

But Achilios gave him no chance to even begin it. The archer threw himself toward the gathered edyrem who, stunned, reacted as people and cleared a path for the dead man. Achilios made good use of their reaction, bolting outside before any could recover.

“Achilios!” Uldyssian shouted. “Wait!”

He rushed after his childhood friend, ignoring the clamoring that began among those gathered. To them he ordered, “Get those bodies out of there and see to her! Don’t move her any more than necessary but make her comfortable! Do it!”

Outside, more edyrem stood in shock, most of them still looking west. Uldyssian ran in that direction, trying to locate the incredibly swift Achilios by both eyesight and higher senses. Yet, the archer was invisible to both.

As he neared the edge of camp, Uldyssian saw a sentry turn his way. The man, a Parthan, gaped. Uldyssian seized the guard and demanded, “A pale figure! Did he run by here?”

“No, no one’s come this way—Master *Uldyssian*?”

He could explain his miraculous return to the guard when he did so to the rest. Shoving aside the Parthan, Uldyssian entered the jungle. Achilios had to have gone this way, but try as he might, Uldyssian could not sense him at all.

Defeated, he finally returned to the encampment. By that time, a great mob had gathered near the sentry, who was animatedly describing his encounter with their lost leader. Everyone grew silent when Uldyssian approached, but he had no time for them yet.

Still, he had to say something. “I’ll tell all later. Return to your rest.”

It was very doubtful that any of them would sleep, but Uldyssian could only hope. For now, he had to concern himself with Serenthia.

Those still surrounding the ancient building scattered out of his way as he neared. Without a glance to any of them, Uldyssian entered.

Serenthia still lay on the floor, but someone had had the presence of mind to set a blanket under her head and another over her torso. Her breathing was regular, for which Uldyssian thanked the stars.

Then, he recalled particular stars, those that made up the dragon, and nearly took back his silent gratitude.

Going down on one knee, Uldyssian touched Serenthia's face. It was pleasantly warm.

A slight moan escaped her. Her eyes flashed open and she attempted to rise.

"Achilios! Achilios! Don't—don't leave—" Her strength failed her. Serenthia had to lay her head down again. Despite that, though, she kept her eyes open and repeated over and over the same thing. "Achilios...don't leave...don't leave..."

Uldyssian was caught between relief and jealousy. Serenthia seemed mentally intact and physically unharmed, for which he was grateful, but that her first cries had been for the archer...

Silently berating himself for his extreme selfishness, Uldyssian leaned nearer. "Serenthia...Serry...do you hear me? How do you feel?"

"Uldyssian?" Her eyes finally focused on him. "I—I think I'm all right." She stiffened. "No! That thing! I know it! She's coming for me! It was—" The merchant's daughter clutched his arm. "Uldyssian! Lilith! Lilith was coming for me—"

"I know. I know. Hush, Serenthia! Lilith's been sent away again—"

But she was finally beginning to register her unsettling surroundings. "Where—where are we? The last I recall, I was by the river! I sensed her nearness too late! And then it was as if—as if she were *inside* me! Where *are* we, Uldyssian? Tell me the truth!"

There was no way he could keep the truth from her. If Uldyssian even tried, Serenthia was certain to eventually learn everything from the others.

"Listen to me carefully, Serry," he murmured. "We will talk about this later—"

The fire began to return to her. "No, Uldyssian. I need to know now. Tell me."

He looked back at the others. "Leave us."

They obeyed without protest. Uldyssian used his power to seal the doors behind him, then also blocked those outside from hearing. They would know enough when the time came, but there were some things he felt should remain only between the two of them.

Someone had wisely left a water pouch near Serenthia and Uldyssian bade her drink first. She willingly swallowed a good portion of the contents, then gave him a look that suggested he stall no longer.

And so, with a deep breath, Uldyssian told her what he could and what he dared, cutting matters to the bare facts as much as possible. Serenthia listened without interruption save for the occasional gasp.

Her face, though, more than once nearly caused Uldyssian to stop, especially when he had to tell the merchant's daughter what he knew of Lilith's activities. Revulsion filled Serenthia, but to her credit, she did not lose control.

Then, Uldyssian came to the moment when Achilios had reentered the situation. Here he finally stopped short, not at all certain just how to go on. Was it better to let her believe that he had been no more than a dream?

She knew that he was trying to leave something significant out of the story and so pressed him.

Surrendering to the inevitable, Uldyssian chose a different tact. "Serry," he began in his kindest tone. "Serry, do you remember what you said when you first awoke here? Do you remember at all?"

"You keep calling me 'Serry,'" she countered, her gaze narrowing. "That can only mean you've got something terrible to tell me. What can be worse than what I've heard so far and what has it to do with what I said?"

He could not turn back. "Serry. Think. What did you say? It's vital."

Her brow wrinkled. "Let me think. I was...I was having a dream...or nightmare, I can't say which. I thought I saw...I thought I saw *Achilios*. I must've still been dreaming when I believed I awoke, because I think what I was doing was calling out his name and...and..." Tears suddenly rolled down her cheeks. "Oh, Uldyssian...I thought he'd come back to me! I thought I'd been blessed with a miracle! But—but it was nothing but my imagination..."

Uldyssian swallowed. "No."

"What—what was that?"

"Serry...Serenthia...he was here. You didn't imagine him. Achilios was here."

She frowned at him. "Don't make a jest like that! There's nothing funny about it at all, Uldyssian! How could you do that?"

"I never would. It's not a jest. He was—"

Pulling back from Uldyssian, Serenthia covered her ears. "Stop! Stop that! Don't say such things! Achilios is *dead*! Dead!"

The building started to quake. Small bits of stone rained down on them. Driven by her grief, Serenthia's power was affecting their surroundings.

Uldyssian quickly worked to counter her. The tremor subsided, albeit reluctantly. Serenthia was nearly as strong as him.

She had not even noticed what she had done. Cyrus's daughter shook her head back and forth and tears stained her cheeks. Over and over she repeated the archer's name.

Mouth set, Uldyssian took hold of her wrists and forced her to

listen. "Serenthia! It *was* Achilios you saw! It was no dream!" He could not bring himself to say that it was no *nightmare*. Even he had not quite recovered from the shock of seeing his friend. "It *was* Achilios!"

Her eyes widened and the tears lessened. Hope filled her expression. "You mean that he's—he's—alive?"

"I...Serenthia...I don't know *what* to call what he was...but at least he was still the Achilios we knew and loved. He charged in here when all was lost and managed somehow to stir you to waking. Only because of him, not me, were you able to force Lilith from your body."

"I—I remember hearing his voice. I remember I was in darkness. All I wanted to do was sleep...but his voice...I had to follow it! I wanted so much to see him again..." Wiping away a lingering tear, the dark-haired woman surveyed the chamber. "But where is he, then? Achilios!" She started to rise. "Achilios! Don't hide from me!"

She teetered. Uldyssian quickly supported her. Serenthia put an arm around his waist, her eyes yet seeking the man she loved.

"Why won't he answer me? Why's he hiding?"

"He's not. He ran off when others entered. Serry, I think he's afraid that you'll be repulsed by what he's become."

Serenthia gave him an incredulous look. "Why? He's Achilios!"

"And he should be *dead*. Dead. We buried him, remember?" Before she could suggest the obvious, Uldyssian continued, "There was no mistake! The shaft went through his throat! He should be dead!"

He felt her shiver, but realized that it was not out of fear. "How horrible," Serenthia murmured, eyeing empty air. "How horrible for him..."

As she said it, Uldyssian had to admit that a part of him felt the same for his childhood friend. Achilios had obviously been tracking them for some time, perhaps even within days of his killing. Had he meant them any harm, he could have struck several times over. Thus far, Achilios had only acted like the Achilios of old, ever protective of those for whom he cared.

Especially Serenthia.

"I've got to find him," she abruptly declared. "I've got to find Achilios! He's all alone out there, fearful to be even with me!"

"Serry, he may have good reason—"

Her voice grew sharp. "That's ridiculous! There's *no* good reason for us to be apart. I won't be deterred. I'm going to find him."

Her determination in the face of such drastic events touched Uldyssian deeply. "I'll stand with you, then, Serry. You have the right of it; Achilios has always been there for us...even now. Whatever he must overcome, we should be there for him, too."

That made her finally smile. "Thank you..."

With his continued assistance, she was finally able to leave the sinister building. Outside, they were immediately surrounded by others, Saron among them. Behind the Torajian stood a group of edyrem who were apparently acting as guards to a small, surly group.

Their prisoners were the last remnants of those turned by Lilith. They were but a handful, the rest having been sacrificed to the demoness's madness. Uldyssian recognized all but two and assumed those to be Hashiri. In addition to having the bodies removed, Uldyssian had through his powers secretly passed word to those he felt certain he could trust to locate the guards Lilith had left at the edge of the encampment. From his count, his followers had managed to round up all of them.

"What shall we do with them, master?" asked Saron. His dark expression gave easy indication of what he would have liked. To the mind of most of the edyrem present, the turned were the foulest of traitors...even if their fall from grace was due to Lilith's seductions.

Uldyssian had been unable to save Romus or any of those inside, but he still hoped to salvage these souls. He was already sick of the rising number of dead.

Then, he recalled Serenthia. However, before he could speak, she whispered, "Go ahead. This must not wait, not even for me..."

With that, she pulled away so as to give him room. Uldyssian signaled two of his followers to bring the first of the turned to him. As they approached, he sensed the other edyrem managing to keep the power of the prisoner in check. He was impressed by their action, something that they had not been taught by him.

The man, a Torajian, scowled as Uldyssian leaned into him. He looked ready to spit into his former leader's face, but evidently thought better of it.

For what he planned, Uldyssian knew that he would have to touch the prisoner. That would mean more direct contact with Lilith's taint, but there was nothing that he could do to avoid that if he hoped to save the Torajian.

With a deep breath, he brought his hands up to each side of the prisoner's head. The Torajian tried to shake loose, then settled down, glaring.

Meeting that evil gaze, Uldyssian delved within. He sensed the core of what was the Torajian and how it tied to his power.

It took him no time at all to find the blackness that the demoness had stirred to raging life. It was so evil that a stunned Uldyssian nearly retreated out of repulsion. Yet, to do so would be to abandon all hope for the man before him.

After brief consideration, Uldyssian determined that his best chance

lay in trying to smother or even *remove* the darkness. He imagined it like a solid object and used his mind to try to encase it. If it could be *forced* out—

Without warning, the blackness erupted into pure, monstrous fury. Uldyssian barely had a chance to withdraw his mind—

—and no opportunity at all to prevent the prisoner from tearing free from his guards as if they were nothing and clamping his hands around Uldyssian's throat.

Sharp agony filled Uldyssian as the Torajian squeezed. Intense heat wracked his throat, the escaped prisoner using his own edyrem powers in addition to his brute strength. If not for the son of Diomedes having already had some protections up, he would have been dead already.

"I will rip out your throat and drink your blood!" snarled the Torajian madly. His face distorted, his eyes bulging as if about to pop out and his mouth stretching wide. His teeth grew sharper and his tongue—now forked—darted in and out like a wild snake. "I will—"

He screamed, his hands releasing Uldyssian's throat at the same time. The Torajian took a step back, his body blazing. He attempted once to douse the mysterious but voracious flames...and then burned away into a pile of black ash.

From behind him, Uldyssian heard Serenthia's weary voice. "I had—to—do it. There was nothing—nothing left to save, Uldyssian."

He nodded wordlessly, then, rubbing his throat, surveyed the rest of the prisoners. They did not look at all fearful, but rather full of malice. Uldyssian contemplated searching deeper in the hope of finding *some* chance for their redemption, but recalled too well what had just happened. Lilith had taken into account that someone, perhaps even him, might seek to save those she had turned. The demoness had made that impossible.

Which left Uldyssian with only one bitter choice.

"Stand away from them," he commanded their guards.

Saron quickly protested. "Master, it might not be safe to do—"

"Stand away from them."

They obeyed, but still used their combined might to keep the prisoners at bay. Unfortunately, Uldyssian could not permit them to continue to do that, either, for fear that they might be harmed by what he planned.

"Release them," he ordered. Before Saron could speak anew, Uldyssian added, "I'll deal with the problem. Do as I say."

He sensed the moment that they obeyed and then the one when the prisoners realized that their power was theirs again. Yet, before any of them could become a threat, Uldyssian concentrated.

The turned edyrem froze. Even then, though, he could feel their evil struggles.

“Away with you,” Uldyssian grimly uttered.

A wind picked up around the turned, a fierce wind that touched only them.

As if made of sand, Lilith’s creatures literally *blew* away. The wind ripped up the particles and flung them high, high into the night. Uldyssian did not let his concentration falter as he made that gust throw what had once been men far from his followers. If any trace of the demoness’s taint remained, he did not want it to affect anyone else.

Finally, after what he felt a safe interval and distance, he dismissed the wind. Somewhere to the west, far from where any of the edyrem would have reason to go, he let the dust finally scatter.

Would that it could be so easy with Lilith. But his treacherous lover had protected herself against him, and although he would not admit it to the others, this sort of spell, so akin to what he had done to Lucion, took much, much out of him.

So much so, in fact, that now *he* began to teeter.

“Catch him!” someone called. More than one pair of hands obeyed, Serenthia’s among them.

“I’m—I’m good,” he managed, straightening again. Ignoring the awed stares of the others, he turned to Serenthia. “We can—we can go after Achilios now.”

“No. Neither of us is strong enough for that, no matter how much I deeply want to. He’s followed us this long, Uldyssian; he’ll surely be in the vicinity still.”

That made sense to him, too. Achilios appeared unwilling to give up on his friends.

“For now,” Serenthia continued, “we need rest.” She looked down, and in a voice so soft that only he could hear it, added, “I also need...I need to sleep near you. *Just* sleep. I—I have to.”

“I understand.” She would have nightmares, Uldyssian knew, nightmares of all the things Lilith had done with and through her. From him, Serenthia sought some comfort to get her through those nightmares.

Uldyssian would gladly give her that comfort, too, and not for any other reason than that she was his friend and had been through a terrifying ordeal. More to the point, having seen Achilios reminded him of who Serenthia actually loved. What he had believed to be growing between him and her had merely been again the demoness’s seductions. Small wonder that Uldyssian had fallen into the trap so easily.

But someday...someday he would make Lilith pay...

Achilios had finally stopped running. There was at least a good mile, even two, between him and the camp. Not needing to breathe, the archer had managed the distance in astounding time, even considering the dense growth around him.

As he paused, the same thoughts that had been swirling about his mind since he had begun running returned with a vengeance.

She had seen him.

Serenthia had seen him.

There had been no manner by which he could have avoided a confrontation. The demoness had made that impossible. Achilios had sensed what she had been about and that Uldyssian had been betrayed by one he trusted. The archer felt some sympathy for Romus, but not much. Unlike Uldyssian, who generally saw the good in all men, Achilios had tended to keep a watch out for the bad, as well. True, from what he had seen through the air slit the Parthan had appeared to attempt to redeem himself, but perhaps he had merely been trying to avenge his own death. Achilios neither knew nor truly cared.

All that mattered was that Serenthia was free of her possession... that, and that she had seen him.

He had no idea what to do about that.

With an unearthly groan, Achilios slumped against a tree. A small lizard near his head sought to quickly scurry away, but the hunter grabbed it without even looking. The reptile squirmed as he brought it around to view. Achilios could feel its heart beating wildly as it tried in vain to escape. It was certain it was about to be eaten.

He savored the small creature's life motions, realizing that he was jealous even of it. A part of Achilios suddenly wanted to *crush* the lizard to a pulp...but instead he set it on the tree again and let it rush to the freedom it had been certain it had lost.

She had seen him...

Achilios could not get that thought out of his mind. He was haunted by it.

The archer let out a grating chuckle. He, the walking dead, was *haunted*.

"It...doesn't matter..." Achilios quietly grated. "Doesn't matter..."

But it did. He had taken some small comfort in being able to at least be near Serenthia, and on occasion, secretly aiding both her and Uldyssian. That would be next to impossible now.

Yet, if not to help those nearest and dearest to him, of what use was his resurrection? Perhaps he should call and call Rathma or the

dragon until one of them came and put him to rest forever...

Despite the sense of that...Achilios uttered no sound. Even this mockery of life was something, if only because Serenthia still lived.

You must make a choice! the archer berated himself. *Either stay clear forever or show yourself to her and pray that she doesn't go screaming in terror...*

Achilios grunted. More likely, Serenthia would deem him the abomination he was and use her new powers to do what he had just been considering asking of those who had brought him to this state.

And that settled it for him. He would go to her, to all of them, and reveal the truth. If she and only she demanded he return to the grave, then Achilios would obey.

He turned...and before him suddenly shone a brilliant blue light.

Achilios backed away, an arrow already drawn. A memory once hidden from him flashed through his decaying brain, a memory preceding his collapse near Hashir.

There had been a light there, too. He remembered now.

But this was not the same light, that he knew immediately. However, whatever its source, Achilios had no doubt that he would not like its presence so near.

He fired the arrow, and even as it left the bow, reached for a second.

The shaft soared into the exact center of the unsettling glow, soared into it...and out the other side. It struck a tree beyond with a hard thud.

Undaunted, the archer readied the second. This time, though, he waited.

Achilios was rewarded but a moment later. A shape vaguely human appeared in the mist of the blue light. With grim satisfaction, Achilios pulled. He thought that he caught a glimpse of some armor—a silver-blue breast-plate—and adjusted his aim accordingly.

I HAVE NEED OF YOU...

The voice echoed throughout his entire rotting body in a manner akin and yet not akin to that of Trag'Oul. At the same time, Achilios's grip on his weapon weakened. In fact, no part of him seemed to want to obey his commands anymore.

Like a rag doll, the archer collapsed.

He fell face-first, making him unable to see what was happening. Achilios listened for footsteps, but heard none. Nevertheless, when the voice spoke again, he felt as if its source now hovered over his corpse.

I HAVE NEED OF YOU... it repeated.

And, as Achilios now also recalled what had happened last time... the archer blacked out.

Eighteen

They did not find him. Despite their combined efforts, Uldyssian and Serenthia discovered no trace of Achilios. Refusing to give up, Uldyssian kept his followers in the same location for two extra days. However, by the end of that period, even Serenthia felt it unwise to postpone the march any longer.

"We have to move on. Achilios either is not around or he doesn't wish to be found by me...at least right now," she said morosely. "I've got to think it's the second reason and that, eventually, he'll come back to me."

"He can't stay away from you. I've known Achilios even longer than you, Serenthia. You'll see."

His companion nodded, glancing not for the first time out into the jungle. "Does he really think I'd be so terrified by him?"

"I told you how he looked." Uldyssian had not been graphic in his description, but he had left nothing out. Despite that, though, Serenthia's sympathy for the archer had only grown.

"And I've no doubt that I'll probably gape and gasp when I do see him, but you say it's still Achilios. How can I not love him, then?"

He had no answer to that. Besides, she was correct that they had to get moving. Lilith had surely not been standing by idly; whatever new course her plot had taken, it would not do to simply wait for it to pounce upon them.

That is, if it was not already too late.

Saron, a Hashiri named Rashim, and the Parthan Timeon, were now the unofficial commanders of their various folk. Uldyssian had not intended each party to be divided up so, but he also did not wish to make one group seem dominant over another. It was his hope that by treating the Parthans, Hashiri, and Torajians on an equal basis, that they would further blend and eventually he could dispense with calling them anything but edyrem.

Timeon was the cousin of Jonas, one of the first of Uldyssian's converts. Jonas had always been among the first of the Parthans to volunteer for different tasks, but he had never shown any desire to act as one of Uldyssian's seconds. Still, the once-scarred man assisted his cousin in organizing their remaining comrades from the town...a group particularly smaller than the others now.

This must end soon, Uldyssian thought, watching those most like the

people with whom he had grown up. Each time a Parthan died, more of Uldyssian's past faded away. He had to finish his struggle before all of Jonas's people were slain...and along with them the Hashiri and Torajians, too.

Uldyssian had not spent all of his time on Achilios. He had also explained, in an abbreviated form, his vanishing to his followers. Naturally, he had left out such fantastic details as Trag'Oul and Rathma, feeling that now was not the right time to try to explain *them*.

The edyrem marched come dawn the next day. Because of Lilith's wicked detour, they had lost three more days in addition to those spent by him and Serenthia searching for Achilios. Three more days to give the demoness time to devise their doom...

The jungle proved unduly quiet as they wended their way through it. A few birds could be heard in the far distance and there were always insects, but even they were less evident than normally. Uldyssian took this as an omen, but did not mention it to anyone else, not even Serenthia. Still, he kept the edyrem watchful, reminding them that their enemies were cowardly and often sprang from the shadows rather than face them directly.

When they finally reached the river—half a day earlier than he had originally hoped—Uldyssian gave thanks. Their path was now clear again. Still, despite wanting to push on for at least another hour, he knew that he had already worn out the others too much. With reluctance, Uldyssian called for a halt.

The lone benefit of Lilith's vile possession of Serenthia was that the demoness had brought with her from Hashiri charts of the regions leading to the lands surrounding the main temple. The charts were old, but they were accurate enough in identifying not only the general location of Uldyssian's adversaries, but the largest population centers between him and the Triune.

"Yes, I know of Kalinash," answered Rashim to his question as he pointed to where the city lay. The bushy-haired Hashiri had served as an apprentice to a merchant and had made the journey there more than once. "It is a little larger than where I am from and the temple there would be strong, so near Kehjan." His finger slid more north. "Of Istani, I know little, save that it is smaller than Hashiri and not so rich despite its location."

Saron acknowledged the second. "The Triune would not be so strong there. If the master wishes to reach the main temple swiftly, it would be good to take the road leading closer to there."

On the one hand, Uldyssian agreed with that logic, but on the other, he did not like leaving the Triune's supporters in Kalinash untouched, and especially at the edyrem's rear when it came time to confront the main citadel. Yet, to veer toward Kalinash would further

slow the trek and cost lives; both things that would only benefit Lilith.

“How quickly can we reach Kalinash?”

After a moment’s consideration, Rashim answered, “Four, five days.”

“And Istani?”

“Four.”

The path was quicker. More important, with a much smaller presence of the Triune, Istani promised not to slow them in terms of struggle. Kalinash might mean many days of blood...

With some reluctance, Uldyssian came to a decision. “Very well. Istani, it is. But we must move with all haste.”

The others nodded obediently and departed. Uldyssian looked to Serenthia for some confirmation that he had chosen wisely.

“I would’ve done the same,” she returned. Her brow furrowed. “What else is bothering you?”

“Two things...or two people. Achilios, as you know...and Mendeln.”

“Of course. I’ve discussed Achilios with you enough to sicken you, Uldyssian. Forgive me for not thinking about your brother. This—this Rathma. Do you think he can be trusted?”

He grunted. “I don’t know. As much as any of the blood of Lilith can be...which I suppose includes me far, far down the generations.”

“Then, Mendeln will be all right.” Serenthia considered. “His path converges with yours, but I think it also diverges more and more.”

“I don’t care anything about that, Serry.” He had returned to calling her by her childhood name, the better to keep in his head that they were friends, not lovers. Uldyssian had no desire to stomp upon the grave of his friend, especially now that he knew that grave to be empty. “I just want Mendeln safe.”

“As he does you.”

“But it would be good to hear some word. *Some* word.”

She shifted into a sleeping position near the fire. “I know. I know.”

And from her tone, Uldyssian understood that she desperately desired the same from Achilios.

Mendeln had never dreamt that he would return to Partha. That place was supposed to be far in his past. He had tried to erase his memories of the town, for in Partha had come what he felt the final severing of his life as a simple farmer and the beginning of all the cataclysmic changes for and within him. There had been no turning back after Partha, even more so than Seram, which the younger son of Diomedes was also glad to avoid.

Trag'Oul and Rathma had sent him here alone...for some final test, they said. As usual, their replies to his questions were murky. In the end, with the promise that he could rejoin his brother if he finished this task, Mendeln had agreed to return to the town.

And only after arriving had he realized that Trag'Oul had used the word "if"...

He did not actually stand in the town itself. No, Mendeln sensed that what he sought was far outside the town walls. Very close to where the Parthans disposed of their refuse. A faint hint of decay already indicated that he was near the spot.

There was no one else about. Those still living in the town—which surely had to be more than half-empty—were likely asleep. The few guards would not be bothering with this area; who would be interested in their trash?

Mendeln certainly was not. He was only here because this also happened to be where the burning had taken place. According to Rathma, it was the best location to make the summoning.

Uldyssian's brother had little desire to cast the spell, but his mentors insisted that it was necessary. He had the feeling that they were not telling him something...not at all a surprise. Their methods of teaching, especially that of Lilith's son, left much to be desired.

The confrontation with Inarius had influenced this event. Of that, Mendeln was certain. After bringing him back to the dragon's realm, Rathma had requested a private audience with the celestial beast. The first announcement after their discussion had been the requirement that Mendeln do this.

I should have refused, he told himself for the dozenth time. *I should have demanded that they send me back to Uldyssian.*

Somehow, though, even if he had, Mendeln knew that he would have ended up back in Partha.

From his robes, he removed his dagger. It would guide him to the exact location, so Rathma had said.

As soon as he held it up, it glowed. Mendeln turned, noting when the dagger flared brighter. Yes, he recalled the area well, recalled all the grisly events.

Here they and the Parthans had unceremoniously burned the bodies of the high priest Malic and his morlus.

Mendeln still recalled the man with a shiver. He was not afraid of Malic, but of his evil. How any man could give himself to such darkness was beyond him. The mere thought of Malic repulsed Mendeln so much that he wanted to turn around and leave.

But Rathma had insisted that he needed to do this.

Taking a deep breath, Uldyssian's brother tried to summon the

feeling of calm determination that the dragon had taught to him. In order to best serve the Balance...and, therefore, Sanctuary and Humanity...Mendeln had to learn to see things in a more clinical manner. Emotion was not forbidden, for even Rathma clearly fell prey to it, but that emotion had to be kept in check, for the forces with which Mendeln dealt could be very dangerous.

As ready as he knew he could ever be, Mendeln knelt down and began sketching patterns designed to amplify his efforts. They were based on the very energies binding not only his world together, but all that beyond Sanctuary. The patterns pulled to them some element of those energies, bringing them to the location of the summoning.

With that accomplished, Uldyssian's brother held the dagger over the center. He did not have to draw blood for this, although there remained the possibility that he might have to at a later point. Now, all that mattered were the words, which themselves were parts of the energies keeping all things together.

In a low tone, Mendeln uttered one word of power after another. With each syllable, he sensed the forces swirling into place. An ominous presence began to coalesce within the area of the patterns.

Mendeln repeated everything that he had been told to say in such a situation, repeated all of it over and over. Each time, he added emphasis to a different part, in this way strengthening every aspect of the summoning.

Something drifted past his face, so very gently rubbing against his right cheek. A gauzy wisp of smoke drifted in from the direction of the town. As Mendeln continued, these and similar sights began to move around and around him like small children seeking attention.

Rathma had warned him that, until he learned to focus better, others would come in the mistaken belief that he had summoned them. There was nothing he could do right now save ignore the uninvited spirits; to dismiss any would mean to lose concentration at the most vital moment.

Yes, he could sense the dark presence gathering strength. It was in conflict, on the one side not desiring to be stirred up, on the other eager to see if somehow this could be used to its advantage.

Mendeln gripped the dagger tighter, aware that he could not let the latter happen. The dragon had warned him of the potential repercussions should that terrible thing come to pass.

And then...a black form arose above the spot, a sinister form quickly swelling to the height of a tall man. Still muttering, Mendeln cautiously stepped back. So long as the patterns he had drawn remained whole, the spirit could not escape them without his assistance.

The shadow solidified, taking on the vague appearance of a particular figure. Tall, pale, and bearded.

The high priest of the order of Mefis—or Mephisto—*Malic* himself.

Grimly satisfied, Uldyssian's brother met the dire spirit's unblinking gaze. Malic recognized him; that much was immediately clear. Mendeln could sense the smoldering hatred behind the emotionless face and saw the shadow of a hand—an inhuman hand—briefly emerge from the misty, translucent robes.

Whether or not the ghost could strip Mendeln's flesh from his bones—as Malic had done to Master Ethon when alive—the son of Diomedes did not know. He did not intend to give the specter the chance to test that.

“You know who I am, priest,” Mendeln muttered. “You know that you are not permitted to act or speak in any manner without my permission or guidance. Nod your understanding.”

Malic slowly did, his eyes never leaving his summoner's.

Satisfied thus far, Mendeln turned to the purpose of his having called up this ghoulish figure. “Malic...your master is no more...”

For the first time, he registered a brief reaction. The spirit flickered out of and back into existence with a swiftness that the untrained eye would not have noticed. There was also a momentary shift of the dead eyes.

“Yes, priest, Lucion is dead.” Not exactly true. Uldyssian had caused the demon to cease to exist. According to Rathma, there was something different about such a fate, although Mendeln did not yet understand the vagaries of such things. “And do you know who now sits in his place? Do you know?”

The ghost was utterly motionless. Mendeln frowned, having expected much more from Malic. Trag'Oul had warned him that those existing in the “afterdeath” state were not necessarily averse to attempting to cross back over or seek vengeance on those whom they hated. Malic knew him, knew that he was Uldyssian's brother.

The sooner Mendeln was able to judge if Malic could be of use, the better. “It is *Lilith*, his sister,” he informed the specter. “You may recall her in another guise, priest, that of the lady Lylia.”

This time, the ghostly figure wavered and his eyes widened beyond human ability. His mouth opened...and *continued* to open, stretching more than a foot down. Mention of Lilith, especially her mortal guise, had finally done the trick. After all, it was *she* who had actually slain the priest.

Mendeln was astonished by the ghost's continued violent reshaping. He had been forewarned by his mentors that spirits were not bound by their mortal states, that they could appear in a variety of twisted

forms attesting to their deaths, their anger, or their intentions—

Intentions...

Mendeln spun around, already mouthing new words, those given to him as a quick defense against the unthinkable. At the same time, he thrust the dagger as far ahead of him as he could, drawing sharp slashes in the air.

With a frustrated hiss, the shadow of a morlu collapsed to dust. A second of the creatures, made the more macabre by this fiendish reconstruction of burnt ash and dirt, nearly had its fleshless hands upon him. Mendeln turned the dagger around for use as a weapon and touched the chest of the undead.

The second morlu also collapsed back into dust.

But the third struck him hard on the shoulder with a piece of rotting timber. Mendeln grunted and fell back out of reach. The morlu stumbled forward, bits of it flaking off as it moved.

These were not truly the monstrous warriors who had accompanied the high priest, for Mendeln himself had made certain that the creatures could never be raised to fight again. No, what stood before him were constructs animated by Malic's evil. Still, even if only that, this morlu had the brute force not only with which to slay Uldyssian's brother, but then assist its creator in enabling the ghost to free himself.

And if that happened, Partha would be only the first of many places to suffer horribly...

The morlu swung, but his aim was erratic. Mendeln leapt to the side, easily evading it. If that was the best the beast could do—

Then, Mendeln recalled just where Malic's ghost stood in relation to him. As the morlu attacked again, the son of Diomedes threw himself in an entirely different direction. It meant landing hard on congealing trash, but that was a small price to pay to keep the priest's plan from succeeding.

Indeed, Malic had come within *inches* of freeing his spirit. Had Mendeln been herded just a little more in the previous direction, then his boot would have scraped away a part of the patterns securing the specter.

The morlu loomed over his intended victim, but now Mendeln had his bearings. He held fast the dagger point down and cried the words of banishment that the dragon had taught him.

The last of Malic's puppets crumbled. The timber clattered next to Mendeln's head.

Rising, Mendeln turned back to face the high priest. "No more of such tricks!" he commanded. "Raise up another and I will cast you to a place that will make your violent death seem so pleasant by

comparison!”

It was an exaggeration, Mendeln not having learned how to do any such thing, but if worst came to worst, he could at least dismiss the shade.

Malic, his appearance once more “normal,” wavered. At last, the ghost dipped his head once. Mendeln silently cursed himself for having fallen for the priest’s diabolical distraction. While Rathma and Trag’Oul had warned him that a powerful priest such as Malic might be able to circumvent the rules of the summoning, Mendeln doubted that even they had expected such a startling maneuver. Great had been the power granted Mephisto’s high priest, even in death.

But Mendeln would have no repeat of that. As the ghost hovered, Uldyssian’s brother bent low and made corrections to the patterns. He then repeated other words given to him by Trag’Oul and—on a hunch—altered some others to further add to what he believed a better spell.

Rising, Mendeln addressed the spirit again. “Malic, you heard what I said. She who slew you is not masquerading as the Primus. You are eager for revenge; why not toward her?”

It was no difficult matter to feel the priest’s abrupt interest. Mendeln decided that it was time to permit the ghost to speak.

“Well?” he asked of Malic.

The high priest’s voice came out as a vicious rasp that made Achilios’s so much more alive by comparison. “Brother...of Uldyssian ul-Diomed...what will you...have of me?”

“Knowledge of the temple near the capital. Its dangers and hidden secrets. Those things that Lucion made that Lilith now controls...”

The ghost laughed, a jarring cough with no humor in it. “Brother of Uldyssian ul-Diomed...you ask more than...can be told...” The translucent figure gave a smile. “...but it can be *shown*...”

This was not part of what the dragon and Rathma had discussed with Mendeln. There had been no explanation of what to do if Malic sought to *accompany* his summoner. Still...now that he had the specter under control, Mendeln saw the value in having the priest for constant questioning.

The only trouble was...how to accomplish this. He did not want to go back and ask the others. Mendeln considered for a moment, then turned the dagger to where the pyre had burned strongest. He focused on what it was he desired, willing the dagger to draw it to him.

The blackened ground underneath Malic’s vague form shook as if the body of the priest himself were about to rise up from the ashes like the morlu. Instead, though, what at last erupted to the surface was a small, white fragment like a pebble. It paused once it was free

of the soil, then rolled directly to Mendeln's waiting hand.

He straightened, studying the object. The largest bone fragment remaining of the high priest.

Mendeln touched the blade's tip to the bone. He then muttered a binding spell akin to what he had utilized to keep Malic sealed within the patterns. The words used were again Mendeln's own combinations, but something just felt right about them.

He prayed that he had not made a fatal mistake.

Clutching the fragment, Uldyssian's brother studied the patterns on the ground. Then, with one quick sweep of his foot, he destroyed them.

The ghost let out a sigh. He lost all form. Now no more than mist, Malic suddenly swirled into the bone fragment. Once he was within, the fragment flared bright once, then returned to its normal state.

Mendeln carefully checked to make certain that Malic had done nothing sinister. Detecting no fault in his spellwork, he finally exhaled in relief.

But before he could actually relax, from the direction of the town there came excited cries. Whether or not they concerned Mendeln, he did not wish to discover. His task here was at an end. As Trag'Oul had previously instructed, Mendeln used the dagger to draw a circle in the air, then two small symbols within.

Yes, I sense you... came the dragon's voice.

The next moment, Mendeln stood in the familiar darkness. He was surprised to not see Rathma.

"I've done all you asked," he told the stars.

They changed position briefly, then, as ever, became the half-seen leviathan. *Yes...all that was asked...and much that was not expected...*

"What do you mean?" Mendeln could think of only one thing. He produced the bone fragment. "I know that you only sought information from the priest's shade, but I realized that questioning him would take too long and there might be other points that would come up later, when it was too late. I judged that the best course was to risk taking him with me. Was I wrong to think so?"

Whether you are wrong, the Balance shall show, responded Trag'Oul calmly. *But how you managed the feat is what most interests me...*

"I merely followed the teaching of both you and Rathma and adjusted as I believed would work. Thankfully, I was not wrong." Mendeln frowned. "Did I do wrong?"

Rather, it should be said that you did the impossible...but then, the brothers ul-Diomed have been revising the meaning of that word over and over...

Mendeln did not understand. All he had done was attempt to follow

through a logical procession. Why would Trag'Oul, to whom so much was possible, say otherwise?

Nevertheless, the dragon went on. You offer new hopes and potential with this direction you have taken. I have observed the binding on the stone; I cannot foresee the priest's ghost freeing himself.

"I am glad to hear that—"

But do not mistake his alliance for obedience. The shade will seek to undermine, if he can, for his own ends...

There was no opportunity for Mendeln to reply, for Rathma materialized next to him, the demoness's son fighting to keep his normally disinterested expression intact. Mendeln had become experienced enough reading the ancient spellcaster to know that what news he brought was not good.

"He is nowhere to be found," Rathma reported, more to Trag'Oul than to Mendeln.

You have gazed upon all planes?

"Naturally. I have also summoned him in a hundred manners, some of which put me at risk. It was necessary to do so, though the results were not as I wished."

The dragon was oddly silent for a time. Then, *You realize, my friend, that there are few other paths...*

Rathma nodded. "Yes, the most preferable one is that somehow he has passed on to that place from which even you could not summon him back. Certainly, it would be his reward for what he had so far done."

His reward...yes...that would be the best hope...

"But you find that as unlikely as I do."

Mendeln had listened to their back-and-forth long enough. "Who? Is my brother in danger? Is that of whom you speak?"

Rathma's aspect grew as grim as Mendeln had ever seen it. "No. It is your friend, Achilios. I can find no trace of him. None."

"Is that possible?"

"Possible...barely. Potentially devastating, definitely."

"Does Lilith have him?" Mendeln's mind raced as he attempted unsuccessfully to determine just what the demoness would do with the archer.

"If that were so, I would be much relieved," her son replied frankly. "No, Mendeln, I fear someone else has him and it *may* be my father."

"Inarius?" But the moment after he spouted the angel's name, Mendeln recalled the odd inflection in Rathma's voice when uttering one word. "But wait! What did you mean by 'may'?"

There was silence, made the more ominous by the stirring of the stars above them. Whatever Rathma had hinted at, Trag'Oul

understood exactly and did not like.

And if it so disturbed even the timeless entity, it meant ill for not only Uldyssian, but likely all of Sanctuary.

"I mean..." Rathma began slowly, looking very weary. "I have charted path after path concerning my father and cannot fathom any reason that he would take your Achilios so blatantly. His presence would explain one short period of mystery, but certainly not this. This is not how Inarius works..."

Even though Trag'Oul was stable, he yet radiated his concern, too. *No...it is not...*

"And if that is the case, it may be that we are all already doomed." The son of Lilith declared the end of Sanctuary with barely any inflection. "For if it is not Inarius who has taken Achilios...then I fear that it was another angel..."

"Another angel? Surely, a demon instead!"

"No. That I have made certain of. No denizen of the Burning Hells could have taken him without leaving their foul touch behind. Only with my father have I seen such absence of signs."

The stars that were Trag'Oul grew more and more agitated, as did Mendeln. They all knew what it meant if another angel was present.

The High Heavens had discovered Sanctuary.

The end of the world was imminent.

Nineteen

There was no word from Mendeln and certainly none from Achilios. Uldyssian feared for both of them, but could not let their absences hinder him any longer.

The edyrem marched. Marched in the direction of Istani. The closer they got to the smaller city, the more Uldyssian took precautions, especially when it came to scouting. Not only did he stretch his abilities to their utmost, but for the first time he dared send out others even farther beyond. They, in turn, maintained contact with him and those nearest, creating a sweeping field that, besides its main function, Uldyssian also hoped would keep any of those who had volunteered from suddenly vanishing or being attacked.

With barely a day more to Istani, Uldyssian remained tense. The supreme temple lay not all that much farther away; he had no doubt that they were already preparing for his coming. The sooner the edyrem finished with Istani, the better.

Serenthia joined him at the lead. "Should we even stop? I know that you've gone back and forth about it since we began moving again, but the main temple is so close..."

"I know. I've been considering something." Uldyssian finally summoned Rashim to him. "I've a mission for you, if you will accept it."

"Of course, master!" the Hashiri eagerly replied.

Wincing at the man's willingness to take on what might be a deadly task, Uldyssian explained, "I want you to find four others and race as quickly as you can toward Kalinash."

This startled both Rashim and Serenthia. "Kalinash, master?" the Hashiri repeated. "Surely *Istani*?"

"No. Kalinash. Ride for a full day and keep seeking with your mind as I've shown. I want to know if there's any movement at all from that direction."

Understanding now came to the others. "Aaah, yes, master," Rashim replied. "I will pick the others and be gone as quickly as the wind!"

"Rashim...always take care. Return as soon as you can. Don't go any farther."

"I will obey, master."

Serenthia nodded in approval. "You fear a trap."

“They know that we’re coming. There could already be an army or worse heading toward us from the south. Why else wait until we’re pounding at the gates?”

She mulled this over for a moment, then answered, “Because they have something even more terrible awaiting us *there*?”

“That may very well be the case,” Uldyssian agreed, “but I can’t take the chance that we’re being outflanked.”

“No...you’re right. Rashim is good; if there’s anyone coming, he’ll definitely alert us, Uldyssian.”

“That’s what I hope.”

True to his word, Rashim and his chosen set off but minutes later. Uldyssian had not allowed the rest of his followers to even slow during that time. The mass of bodies was so great that they stretched for a mile in the jungle and for the first time, Uldyssian formally thought of them as an army, too. The term had drifted into and out of his mind over the course of events, but with the confrontation with the Triune close at hand, he decided that he had to treat them as such. Discipline had to be at its utmost; otherwise, even with the advances made lately by many—including the newest converts—the edyrem’s combined powers might not yet be enough to defeat Lilith and her pawns.

Not that Uldyssian was all that certain that victory was assured even if they were.

The day wore on. He sensed Rashim now and then, a simple touch from the Hashiri’s mind enough to let Uldyssian know that all was well with the scouting party and that nothing had so far been detected. It was very possible that Kalinash was entirely ignorant of events. Uldyssian certainly hoped so.

When evening came and the edyrem halted, he summoned Saron, Timeon, Jonas, and all the others who had some sort of commanding role and reemphasized the importance of coordinating every aspect of their journey from this point on. For the first time, the children and weaker among them were slowly being ushered to the rear, where a select group of the stronger would assist in protecting them. The rest of the edyrem were divided under Uldyssian’s most trusted.

Only Serenthia and he had no one personally under them, they being the two to coordinate most of the potential action. It still surprised him that the merchant’s daughter had become second only to him; this was not a Serenthia he could have earlier in his life ever imagined knowing.

But without her, Uldyssian could not have imagined now leading such a vast force.

Shortly before daybreak, he awoke to the sense that Rashim was

trying to contact him. At first, Uldyssian expected to hear the worst, but the Hashiri had only sought to tell them that he and his companions were beginning their return. There had been no hint of danger emerging from Kalinash; the city appeared entirely oblivious to the edyrem's movements.

That gave Uldyssian tremendous relief. He alerted Serenthia and the others. Then, as soon as everyone had eaten, he ordered the edyrem on their trek again.

And barely three hours into the day, they sighted the towers of Istani in the distance.

Istani might have been smaller than Hashiri or Toraja, but it still appeared much larger than Partha. Uldyssian made an estimate as to the size of the temple based on what he had seen in the previous cities. Not very large, but with the potential to cause enough of a delay to jeopardize their chances of reaching their ultimate destination before Lilith could plot anew.

He decided that there would be no preliminary introduction to the citizenry, as he had done each time in the past; Uldyssian would strike directly at the temple the moment he could and pray that he would be able to make the rest of the Istanians understand that he had done it in part for their sakes.

Aware that the priests might be scrying for any trouble and certain that the edyrem could not remain entirely hidden, Uldyssian sought out the most open path to the city. Speed was essential.

Rashim and the others were not yet back, but Uldyssian could not wait for them. He had the rest of the edyrem spread out as they neared the thinning jungle. Soon, very soon, the gates of Istani would stand before them—

He straightened. For just the slightest of moments, Uldyssian could have sworn that he had felt...

But no...it had to be his anxiety. It had to be.

"Serry," Uldyssian murmured. "Stand next to me and follow my will."

She did not question why, trusting in him as always. Once Serenthia was ready, Uldyssian guided her mind to where he wanted her to focus.

"Do you see or sense *anything*?" he asked.

"No—for a moment, I thought—but no—"

It was the answer that Uldyssian expected and receiving it only made him more suspicious. "Serry, will you let me try something?"

"Together, you mean?" She knew about the spellwork that Lilith had shown Uldyssian while pretending to be her. "If you think it worth to try, then I'll do it."

Rather than position themselves as he and Lilith had, Uldyssian simply stood next to Serenthia. They shut their eyes and concentrated on reaching out to one another...

The results were as swift as they were remarkable. The ease with which the two managed to link pleased Uldyssian, who had, in truth, feared complete failure.

There was only one trouble with the link and that was the incredible closeness it created between Uldyssian and Serenthia. To prevent any stirring of his feelings, he quickly guided her mind out in the direction he wished to survey.

However, even after the two of them completed what he felt a thorough search, Uldyssian came away with nothing. He did not even detect what had earlier disturbed him and knew that neither had Serenthia. After a few more minutes of futile hunting, Uldyssian ceased the effort.

"I was wrong," he muttered. "Merely my imagination."

"That's better than *another* threat, isn't it?"

Uldyssian nodded. "Just so long as I don't start seeing shadows everywhere. It'll become that much harder to tell when a real danger rears its head..."

The edyrem progressed. Uldyssian watched as Istani became an actual city, not merely a few structures above the treetops. He drew in his scouts, wanting no one cut off from the rest. That left only Rashim and his party, who he knew would catch up while Uldyssian was dealing with the local temple.

But to his surprise, before he and his followers could reach the city gates, a contingent from Istani rode out to meet them. There were twenty-five in all, most of them guards. A handful of officials led by a middle-aged, plump figure in rich blue and green silk robes confronted the son of Diomedes.

"We have come to speak with the leader of this army," the plump man said. He wore an elaborate silver nose ring that itself was encrusted with tiny rubies.

Uldyssian strode forward. He did not care that the Istanian, being mounted, had the advantage in terms of eye level; the official would soon learn who truly held the power in this conversation, especially if he sought to protect the Triune.

"I'm who you seek," he told the rider. "I am Uldyssian ul-Diomed." As the official started to speak again, Uldyssian raised his hand. "And I have only one thing to say. You and yours have nothing to fear from us. It's only the Triune. Stand out of our way and the evil truth about them will be revealed soon enough."

The rider fidgeted throughout his speech. Finally, the moment that

Uldyssian stopped, he blurted, “But that is why we have come to you, Master Uldyssian! There is no need to enter Instani! The Triune...they have fled!”

As Uldyssian stared at the man in disbelief, excited voices broke out among the edyrem.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded. “When?”

There was that in Uldyssian’s tone that evidently cowed the official further. He bent low in the saddle, hastily explaining, “It was but two days ago, Master Uldyssian! Without word, the priests, the guards—all within the temple—they did vanish during the night! It was noticed by the sentries and the people the next day, and when we went inside to seek the high priest, we found his chamber empty, too!”

“Do you think they’re lying?” murmured Serenthia, a step behind him.

Uldyssian did not answer, for he had already begun finding out on his own the answer to that question. He sensed no guile on the part of the Istanians—in fact, they were afraid of angering him with this news. Satisfied as to them, Uldyssian then reached out to the city itself, seeking the taint of the Triune.

He found traces, but nothing more. The temple was, as the official had insisted, entirely abandoned. Uldyssian’s mind swept over the three-towered edifice, searching for any clue, but the priests had been very thorough in clearing out their rooms.

Seeking their trail, he located, as in Hashir, a secondary city gate near the temple. There were only a few guards manning it and it did not take the son of Diomedes much guesswork to assume that those sentries had been mystically blinded to the departure.

Once into the jungle, the trail quickly faded, the priests having strived hard to avoid detection. However, what little was evident indicated a route heading directly toward the supreme temple.

While Uldyssian had been doing all this, the Istanians had grown more and more anxious. They could not know what the foreigner was doing standing there as if asleep. The lead official kept glancing back at his counterparts, likely begging for some advice. However, they remained silent, none wishing to be drawn into the talks. Clearly, if there proved to be any violence, the blame would all fall upon the spokesman, who likely had been chosen for this task against his liking.

Withdrawing from his search, Uldyssian exhaled, then met the first rider’s wide-eyed gaze. “You speak the truth.”

This brought renewed excitement from the edyrem. Their master’s enemies were running scared. Victory was surely at hand...

Uldyssian dared not get his own hopes up. Still, this reprieve meant that less time would be lost in this area. If they left in the morning,

they could reach the supreme temple two days earlier than planned.

"You speak the truth," he repeated, "and so there remains only one thing for us before we leave your domain."

The Istani leaders all looked sick. They no doubt expected either some reprisal or some great demand for riches.

"We've need of some food and fresh water. In addition, we must make camp nearby. Any of your people are welcome to trade with us, to learn about us." Because of the shortness of time, Uldyssian could not enter Istani and preach to the locals. That would come later, supposing that he survived his confrontation with Lilith.

A hint of relief spread through the locals. The lead official nodded several times. "Food and water can be provided, yes, Master Uldyssian! There are those who will trade with you also, yes!" He leaned back. "Barenji! See to it, yes?"

One of the other officials nodded once, then turned his horse around and rode off as if on fire.

Uldyssian indicated his gratitude. "That's all, then. If any of you have other questions, I'll answer them; if not, then I wish the wise people of Instani good health and thank them for their efforts."

It was not exactly the formal greeting that he had learned for Hashir, but it was satisfactory. With many bows, the contingent turned and rode back to the city.

"Can they be trusted with the food and water?" asked Timeon. "They may seek to poison it..."

That was highly doubtful to Uldyssian, but he had already considered what to do. "Nothing'll be distributed until I've looked it over."

His answer was, of course, enough to satisfy the others. They had full trust in him, which Uldyssian appreciated. He prayed that he would not let them down.

With the guidance of those among the edyrem who understood the territory best, Uldyssian chose a place to camp for the night. Even before his followers had settled down, the Istani began to bring foodstuff for them. The articles came in wagons drawn by both oxen and more of the huge beasts used in the lowlands. Saron called them *pachyshon*, which meant "long-nosed brothers." The *pachyshon* made delivering the food a quicker operation, for they used their flexible snouts to reach baskets down to where Uldyssian awaited. Once he made certain that there was no poison or other threat, Saron, Timeon, and others began passing the supplies around.

The Istanians treated them with the utmost regard, almost falling over themselves to please. Uldyssian did not expect any of the locals to come to hear about the edyrem, but a large handful did. He

welcomed them and spoke to all as he had times previous. Some of the Istani departed after his speech, but more stayed. To the latter, Uldyssian offered to reveal their own gifts.

This time, he did one other thing as he stirred the latent powers to life. Within each, Uldyssian sought out as best he could any kernel of darkness that he could find and crushed it utterly. There would be no repeat of Lilith's foul work with Romus and the other unfortunates.

And then, before he knew it, the sun had risen again. There was indeed no more reason for staying. From the officials, who obviously wanted to do their best to see the intruders depart as quickly and peacefully as possible, he received updated information on the path leading to the Triune's supreme temple. A couple of the newest converts verified the charts and directions. Uldyssian thanked his reluctant hosts, then led his army on again.

And now...there were no more distractions. Only their goal lay ahead.

Rashim and the other scouts were closer than before, but, as Uldyssian had realized, the swift departure from Istani meant that they were now a day or two again from reuniting with the rest. With Lilith just ahead, Uldyssian could not focus on the small band constantly; instead, he sought out the scouts during each pause. Satisfied that they were still all right, he then returned to constantly attempting to analyze just what the demoness might have in store. But although he thought of a thousand nightmares, Uldyssian doubted that any of them would match her true plan.

The edyrem moved on through the jungle, becoming quieter as they ate away at the miles. It was as if a shroud had fallen over them; for the first time, they became aware of the monumental task quickly approaching.

And then...and then something touched Uldyssian's very soul. A gnawing darkness that grew with each step.

"We're close," he finally muttered to Serenthia. "We're so close..."

She only nodded. Uldyssian doubled his precautions. For him, the Triune was no longer hiding what it was. They—under Lilith's guidance—were trying to undermine the edyrem's confidence.

Uldyssian's mind swept over his followers, reassuring them of their intentions. This new and subtle ploy would fail his enemies, of that he swore.

He wished that Mendeln and Achilios were with him. That he had seen nothing of either bothered Uldyssian, for surely at least his brother would have tried to be there. As for the archer, it was possible that Achilios was nearby, but if so, why had he not at least given some sign?

Uldyssian decided that he could not rely on their assistance. It was up to him and those who stood with him to survive this struggle.

Night came again, the last night, by his calculation, before they would sight the lands surrounding their target. Somewhere to the northeast—so he was told by one of the Hashiri—stood the vast capital. As Uldyssian sat down by one of the low fires, he marveled that its masters outwardly appeared oblivious or unconcerned about the struggle going on. Uldyssian knew that such could not be the case, that they were actually keeping avid watch to see if the victor in this conflict would then be vulnerable.

So much blood...it won't end here...it'll go on and on and on... He wondered if he should just seek out the angel Inarius and ask him to start the world all over. Maybe that was the best course after all...

Uldyssian shook like a dog, trying to jar loose such vile thoughts. He felt ashamed for having even wildly considered them.

Serenthia joined him by the fire. "Are you all right?"

"No," he returned bluntly. "But that never matters."

She was taken aback by his reply. "Uldyssian—"

"Forgive me, Serry. It's nothing. It'll pass. It'll—"

Uldyssian leapt to his feet. Once more, he had that sense that there was something not quite right in the vicinity. He turned in a circle, studying each direction carefully. Back along their trail, Uldyssian almost thought that he noticed something...but then did not.

Coming to his side, Serenthia asked, "What's wrong? What happened?"

He did not answer, instead considering the facts. They were within striking distance of the main temple. The Triune certainly had to know that their arrival was imminent and that there would be no negotiation. Lilith wanted this confrontation. The Triune had even entirely abandoned Istani, where he would have expected that Lilith would have at least forced him to spill more blood before reaching her.

She still wanted the edyrem. That was also a fact. Uldyssian and his followers would face no ordinary battle. Lilith would have something particular in mind...

Once more he checked the region surrounding them. Yet, again, there was nothing.

But what if *nothing* was more than it seemed?

"Serry...the others need to be alert. Please tell them to be prepared for my command..."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

She asked no more questions, instead turning to silently spread the

word. As Serenthia reached out to the others, Uldyssian concentrated on the general area where he had momentarily believed that he had sensed a presence.

There had to be something wrong. There had to be a reason for his wariness. It was more than merely nerves.

He focused hard, trying to draw his will into the task as much as possible. This time, Uldyssian could not simply give up. He had to keep searching, even if it took him all night.

Perhaps that was what Lilith wanted. Perhaps she desired Uldyssian so exhausted that he would make crucial mistakes. Maybe all he sought out beyond the camp was one of her illusions.

No, it has to be more... Uldyssian sweated as he pushed himself harder. There was something out there, something worth much effort in hiding—

And suddenly, it was all there to see.

As if a vast blanket swept back by a powerful wind, the truth revealed itself in one rapid layer after another. Through his mind, Uldyssian saw a row of familiar armed figures slowly but relentlessly wending their way toward the encampment through the thick underbrush. Behind them materialized another row and another and another...and on until it became clear that an army had been secreted from him.

Peace Warders...

The Triune's soldiers were not alone, either. Uldyssian noted priests among them, priests of all three orders. They were the ones casting the elaborate cloaking spell, but he sensed Lilith's hand in its making. Such a casting was far too advanced even for these senior acolytes.

So at last the truth about Istani was known. Lilith had arranged their vanishing, only to have them—and surely warriors from Kalinash and perhaps even the supreme temple—gather nearby. While Uldyssian's concentration had been upon the enemy ahead—even with his attempts to sweep the trail behind the edyrem—they had followed, awaiting the moment to strike.

That moment, it appeared was to be tonight.

Serenthia! Uldyssian silently called. She answered with a questioning note. He quickly filled her in.

But as he did, the son of Diomedes discovered that he had erred. Within the invisible ranks, a priest's mind abruptly closed itself from him.

Instantly, the entire army vanished from Uldyssian's second sight. He had just enough of a last glimpse to see the Peace Warders pick up their pace.

They had noticed him. The attack was coming.

The enemy is behind us! he told not just Serenthia, but everyone. *Behind us! Ready yourselves!*

It should have made absolute sense to Uldyssian that Lilith would send her forces against him at night, not daylight, when most would attack. Worse was the veil of invisibility that added to the darkness. The edyrem could defeat this foe, but they would need to be able to see them in some manner.

Or did they? Uldyssian knew the approximate location of the Peace Warders. That, in truth, was enough with which to start...

He had no time to summon the aid of the others. Uldyssian clapped his hands together. As he had done once before, what sounded like thunder rolled forward. This thunder, though, was a sound wave so powerful that it tore the nearest trees from their roots and sent leaves and vines scattering.

It also, he knew even without seeing, struck the first ranks of the Peace Warders with equal force.

Once again, the blanket blew back. The Triune's minions were revealed to him. The first row lay completely scattered, the two behind it in various levels of disarray. Yet, those farther back, those who had not fallen, only looked more determined, more ready to spill the blood of their master's enemies. Charging past the fallen, the temple's servants waved their weapons...

But they would find themselves a foe more than ready for them now. He felt Serenthia, Timeon, and the other "commanders" of his army letting him know that those in their charge merely awaited his word. However, just as Uldyssian was about to give orders, he felt another presence. Rashim's distant mind reached out to him, the Hashiri's thoughts desperate.

Beware, master! Rashim called. *Beware! They march from the main temple! Look ahead!*

With the Peace Warders almost upon them, Uldyssian dared not take the time to question Rashim further. Instead, he tore his thoughts from the oncoming attackers to the direction in which the edyrem had been marching...the direction in which lay the supreme temple and Lilith.

There, he saw with dread that the Hashiri had been speaking the truth. Like those who had followed the edyrem, these, too, had been expertly hidden from even his sight until now...

There was *another* army—several times larger than that they were about to face—sweeping toward them, an army composed of many Peace Warders and priests, yes...but also something more terrible.

Morlu...hundreds and hundreds of morlu...

Twenty

“We have lost...” Rathma uttered again. “We have lost...”

Trag’Oul was oddly silent. The glittering stars shifted this way and that and in their centers a brooding Mendeln caught glimpses of a multitude of lives. Some were of the past, others of the present. Whether any were of the future, the dragon would not say.

And that boded ill, too...

Uldyssian’s brother finally had to speak. “Surely, there is *something* we can do! The angels have not alighted unto Sanctuary nor have the demons risen out of the black depths onto its surface! There must still be hope!”

“I had always thought that,” returned Lilith’s son. “because I knew that the Burning Hells would do all that they could to keep the secret and thus move at a slow, deliberate pace that I could counter. I knew that my father, too, would not rush matters, for he has no desire to reveal his paradise to his brethren nor face their stern justice for his crimes.”

“And so?”

Rathma frowned. He suddenly looked his centuries of age. “And so, it all would have gone on as before, perhaps for a hundred lifetimes more still. Yet, now that the High Heavens are aware, there is nothing we can do.”

Turning on Trag’Oul, Mendeln blurted, “And you think this also?”

It is not what I think or believe, but what the Balance will demand, son of Diomedes...

“And what does the Balance demand? Tell me!”

The dragon re-formed. The eyes stared deep into the human’s own. *It is for you to tell me...*

But all Mendeln could think about in the face of Rathma’s declarations of doom was his brother. If Sanctuary was to end, he should be there at Uldyssian’s side. They had always sworn to do that, to protect one another. They were the last of their family...

“I want to go to my brother!” Mendeln demanded. “I want to go now!”

He vanished.

Rathma stood silent for a moment, then also looked up at Trag'Oul. "His choice is made."

As the Balance will determine...

"We are bringing the elements together. If they can survive my mother, perhaps there is hope against my father."

Perhaps...your chosen successor was not even defeated by your talk about what will be if the High Heavens and Burning Hells do indeed meet in Sanctuary...

"No...and that with me believing much of it myself, when I spoke it. In truth, Trag, this does likely mean that all is for naught."

If it is to be, it will be. Does that mean that you will do nothing more, as you pretended to him?

Rathma straightened. "Of course not."

The dragon made a sound much like a relieved sigh. *And so, even in our hopelessness, there is hope...*

Here it was, then. Lilith's plan revealed. Once again, he had underestimated her power and cunning.

If not for Rashim's desperate call, there would have been no hope for the edyrem. They would have focused on the Peace Warders approaching from the rear, remaining unaware of the other cloaked force until it was upon them.

Whether the demoness desired to capture most of Uldyssian's followers or slay them and start anew was a moot point. If it ended here one way or another for Uldyssian's dreams, then Sanctuary was lost to either her or Inarius. They would transform Humanity to their wishes—a monstrous army for Lilith or crawling worshippers for the angel.

Uldyssian reacted quickly to the warning, spreading the word to the others. He urged Serenthia and Timeon to him, at the same time ordering the rest to turn around to face the new danger.

They and those with them reached him but a moment later—and barely a breath ahead of the Peace Warders Uldyssian had already confronted.

With wild howls, the servants of the Triune leapt toward the line of edyrem. Uldyssian maintained a calm in the minds of those near him, guiding their initial efforts.

But two of his followers suddenly collapsed, writhing in agony for brief seconds before stilling. Uldyssian sensed the spellwork of the priests and struck back at them. With grim satisfaction, he crushed their hearts from within. The three fell, already dead.

The edyrem were not merely armed with their abilities. Uldyssian

was well aware that many were not capable of continuous effort in that respect. They wielded swords, pitchforks, and whatever tool they were familiar with that could be easily turned into a weapon.

The first line of Peace Warders collided with an invisible wall guided by Serenthia's will. However, those that followed pressed at it and so it became necessary to add attack to defense. For the edyrem, Uldyssian first suggested the most simple of spells. A series of fireballs bombarded the breast-plated warriors. Several screamed as they attempted to douse flames that could *not* be doused. The Peace Warders' advance faltered.

Pleased by this turn, Uldyssian sought out Serenthia. She knew immediately what he wanted of her.

Go! she encouraged him. *Go! The others need you! We'll deal with these!*

As if to emphasize her confidence, the merchant's daughter raised her spear and threw it at an approaching foe. Fueled by her power, it not only impaled the Peace Warder, but dragged his body back until it reached a second warrior who, although wearing a breastplate just as the first had, died much the same. The two bodies tumbled down.

Serenthia held out her hand and the spear dislodged itself, then flew back to her grip.

Go! she repeated with a smile.

Nodding, he turned and ran to where Saron and others had already arranged the most powerful of their edyrem for maximum effect and protection. In the center of the camp stood the youngest and the weakest, but as always, Uldyssian had not left them unprotected. Not only did those among them that had the ability work to shield all, but stronger edyrem still kept watch, too. Uldyssian did not want the priests' spells striking at those least able to defend themselves.

Saron looked very grateful for his arrival. "Master Uldyssian! We have tried and we have tried but we cannot sense those you say approach! Is it possible that Rashim is wrong? He is so far away!"

Uldyssian had not had time to consider the last point, especially since the warning had proven accurate. "They're coming all right, Saron! Everyone needs to be prepared! There are many morlu among them and they will be harder to stop than Peace Warders..."

The Torajian turned bitter. "Yes, Master Uldyssian. I know. It was one of those fiends who slew Tomo."

Having never heard exactly what had happened to Saron's cousin, Uldyssian was momentarily at a loss for words. Then, he suddenly felt the wave of unnatural evil all but at the camp.

"Make no mistake, Saron; they're almost upon us!" Uldyssian sent out the warning to the others, then positioned himself near the lead.

He spread his arms, ready to do as he had against the other attackers.

But before he could, there came a sinister buzzing. Several in the lines looked up in puzzlement. Too late Uldyssian remembered what that ominous sound presaged.

“Keep your shields strong!” he warned.

Dark shapes the size of birds of prey flew out of the shadowy jungle. The buzzing came from them, growing louder and more frightening with nearness.

One man screamed as one of the shapes collided with his chest. The angular object had buried itself deep. Two others also fell, struck down as if by lightning. Uldyssian recognized the vicious weapons that the Peace Warders had once tried to use to assassinate him. The toothlike blades on the edges were designed for maximum carnage. Blood soaked the bodies of the victims.

But most of the remaining weapons in flight collided with air, then went spinning harmlessly away. Still, Uldyssian could sense how unnerved many around him had become. Lilith was doing all she could to undermine their confidence and, thus, their powers.

No sooner had the bladed weapons come flying than Uldyssian sensed the attackers flow forward. At the very last moment, as they surged within striking distance, the spell keeping them unseen fell away.

A gasp arose from many in the forefront as the edyrem beheld the awful sight. More than one of Uldyssian’s followers fell back in fear. Uldyssian tried to boost their confidence with his own, but it was a difficult task in the face of such monstrous foes.

The Peace Warders made up the Triune’s first lines, but they were not the bulk of the threat. That fell to the morlu, seen in such numbers as even Uldyssian could not have believed. He could not say what was worse, that so many existed or that they all looked and moved like the same beast replicated hundreds of times over. Even more than the Peace Warders, the unliving warriors were driven by one urge...to soak their weapons in the blood of their victims.

But neither they nor the Peace Warders were the first to strike. That dark honor went to the priests. Uldyssian sensed their spells and gave warning, but even then, some of his people were not strong enough. Their wills—and thus their shields—were broken. Peace Warders, obviously alerted by the priests, immediately leapt at those vulnerable. For the first time came the clash of arms.

Uldyssian sighted two Peace Warders who had broken through the wall of edyrem. At his command, the first warrior’s weapon turned on its wielder, gutting the man. Uldyssian sent his second foe flying back over his followers and into the vicious throng from which he had

come, using the Peace Warder as an effective missile that bowled over a dozen other fighters.

The edyrem were being assailed on all sides, but they were, for the most part, holding their own. The morlu had yet to join the combat, but would so very soon. Still, Uldyssian had expected more from Lilith

And at that moment, the ground to his left erupted in a mass of horrific tentacles that reached out and grabbed people in every direction. Two of the victims were immediately squeezed to death with such force that they nearly snapped in two. Another was raised up and thrust hard to the ground again, his bones cracking audibly.

Cursing, Uldyssian had to abandon the front lines. He knew that he played into Lilith's hands, but had no choice. He was not even certain himself how to handle the beast, but his powers were the best hope of defeating it before it killed again.

Rather than seek to deal with every individual tentacle, Uldyssian focused on the area from which they had sprouted. The demon—for what else could it be?—had to lurk just below the surface. He could not imagine its size based on all the tentacles and their length, but it had to be enormous.

Lilith had outplayed him yet again. Each of her attacks had been shrouded well. The effort had surely cost her and the priests, but it had served her. He had noticed the one, been warned of the other... but those two had kept him from ever conceiving of an attack from *underneath*.

Uldyssian had no notion as to the demon's weaknesses, but he attacked with the one most sensible. Raging flame suddenly burst at the point nearest to where he thought the tentacles originated. The fire burned not only above the surface, but also directly below.

It had effect. The sinewy appendages flailed, flinging the creature's victims everywhere. Uldyssian instantly spread his powers as wide as he could, creating an invisible net that caught each and every one of them. The effort left Uldyssian panting. Sweat poured over his body as he sought to lower the edyrem to safety.

Just as he was nearly able to accomplish that, something jerked him from his feet. Uldyssian yet managed to keep his net working until he was certain that his followers would not be injured by the remaining drop, then ceased that spell.

One tentacle had his left leg, another seized his waist.

In his head, he heard Lilith.

If you no longer desire my embrace, dear Uldyssian, perhaps you will enjoy that of the Thonos...

She ended the comment with a throaty chuckle. Uldyssian swore at

her, but the demoness had already severed contact. He felt the tentacle crushing his leg and focused on his adversary. The Thonos was obviously an instinctive thing, not a cunning being such as Lilith or her brother or even the demon Gulag. What fought with Uldyssian was truly a beast, which gave him hope that he could outthink it.

But first, he had to free himself. As more of the savage appendages turned his way, Uldyssian noted that at least one had, at some point in the recent past, been cut off. The stub was still dangerous, but lacked the tapering end. That gave him a desperate idea. Uldyssian reached with his free hand to his side—where he kept a long knife—only to have the knife snared by a smaller tentacle. That did not stop him, though. Instead, Uldyssian's mind seized the weapon of the dead Peace Warder, raised it high in the air, and flung it at the foremost tentacle.

Energized by his will, the curved sword made short work of the Thonos's limb.

There came a deep roar and a tremor that sent both edyrem and Peace Warders toppling. Not only did the ruined tentacle go flying back below the surface, but so did the *rest*.

Exhaling, Uldyssian started to rise—

The entire area around him—nearly a quarter of the area of the encampment—exploded as a giant shape shot up from the depths. Screams arose as those nearest fled.

The Thonos did not merely have many tentacles...it *was* tentacles. They all originated from an oval mass at the center, a mass equal to perhaps a dozen Uldyssians. From every part of it sprung limbs of various sizes and lengths, more than a hundred, if Uldyssian could believe his eyes.

And in terms of eyes, the Thonos was also nightmarish. Over those parts of its body that were clear of tentacles were *eyes*, very human eyes. Most were larger than a man's head and all were not only fixed upon Uldyssian, but doing so with deep malice.

A score of limbs shot at him. Uldyssian shoved his palm forward and deflected most, then had to leap out of the way when two others nearly caught him. He summoned the Peace Warder's sword to his hand and slashed at one, but the Thonos moved it out of reach.

The gargantuan demon rushed him, moving swiftly on more than twenty other tentacles. From somewhere, it emitted another deep roar. Uldyssian could spot no mouth and hoped that he would never come near enough to find it.

Lilith's face suddenly formed before the Thonos's macabre body.

All is lost, my love...she mocked. Look about! Your precious followers are falling to my puppets! See?

He would not have even deigned to look, for certainly it sounded as if the demoness sought to distract him further, but the Thonos stilled as if hypnotized. A simple-minded thing of destruction, it no doubt lived simply to obey what it thought was Lucion. Uldyssian wished he could have revealed to it otherwise, but even then the creature might not have ceased its rampage.

Lilith continued to hold the Thonos in check. Uldyssian finally did as she suggested...and saw that, for once, his former lover did not lie. The Thonos's rise to the surface had set into motion chaos among the edyrem, who thought—perhaps rightly—that they now had to fear a terrible danger looming behind them as well as the relentless threat still flowing in from the jungle.

Serenthia's position was the most stable, but even she was hard-pressed. He dared not distract the merchant's daughter by contacting her, for already she fought against more than one Peace Warder herself.

Those battling Lilith's second army were in the most dire straits. The morlu had reached the struggle and were shoving past their living allies in their hunger for edyrem blood. In the face of such evil and aware of the terrifying fiend in their midst, the edyrem were not only losing ground, but losing faith in their own abilities. More and more were resorting strictly to physical weapons and defenses, weapons and defenses that, against morlu, put them at a severe disadvantage.

You see? said Lilith, drawing attention back to her and the Thonos. Would I lie to you? You've led these poor fools to their deaths. They will be slaughtered and all because of you...unless...

He could not help but wait for her to continue. Lilith did not disappoint him.

You can still surrender them, my love...surrender them to me and I will call off the Triune...and my little pet, here...

Surrender them...so that they would be taken to her and converted to her evil crusade. The myriad layers of her plot continued to peel away. Uldyssian had no doubt that the demoness would also continue the slaughter until he finally acquiesced.

For a moment, he considered her demands. So many lives would be saved. There would be no more blood—

But only for the moment.

He had only one answer for her. "Better that we all die, Lilith, than kneel to you even once."

And with that, he thrust out his hand, aiming for the eye most dominating this side of the Thonos.

What began as a stream of light shot through Lilith's smiling countenance, which vanished in its wake. Before the light reached the

monstrous demon, it transformed, solidifying into a gleaming lance.

The point buried itself in the pupil. A yellow pus burst from the eye and the Thonos roared anew.

Scores of tentacles sought for Uldyssian, who had to fight with all his wit and agility to avoid them. Some were so heavy that if they had reached the son of Diomedes they would have surely crushed him; others were so fine that he suspected the Thonos of using them like whips or nooses. Either way, Uldyssian dared not let any get through to him.

If there was any consolation in his desperate situation, it was that the beast was now obsessed only with him. It utterly ignored the edyrem, a fortunate thing in that they were already struggling merely to survive. The morlu had begun cutting a bloody swathe through the left flank, their laughter chilling even Uldyssian's heart.

He knew that he could have helped turn or at least stem the tide, but only if the Thonos was defeated. Yet that in itself would take far too long...if it was even possible. The loss of its eye had more angered the demon than it had injured it. It was just as likely, perhaps even more so, that Uldyssian would soon perish.

But he continued to dodge and deflect the tentacles, amazed for each second that he managed to avoid them. The Thonos roared over and over, its tone almost suggesting that it was becoming annoyed at this gnat's persistence.

Then, without warning, he was grabbed at the ankle. Uldyssian toppled. A smaller tentacle had risen out of the ground, rising up like a serpent from its nest to encircle his lower leg. Uldyssian had underestimated the monster's intelligence, perhaps fatally.

He moved to slice at the appendage, but another tentacle caught his wrist while a third tore the sword away. A fourth pummeled his chest, forcing the air from his lungs...

Uldyssian nearly blacked out. A part of him wondered if that might be for the best; what was left but for him to witness the destruction of the edyrem and his own grisly demise?

Yet, he struggled, albeit feebly. Uldyssian could not regain his breath and, thus, enough wit to use his powers. He felt the Thonos drag him toward it. Through blurry eyes, Uldyssian finally caught sight of the mouth, a menacing beaklike projection underneath the demon's body. A thick tongue dripping with saliva thrust out of the mouth, seeking him.

Stirred by the sight, Uldyssian managed to send a bolt of pure force at the mouth. It struck the tongue, searing it.

Letting loose an ear-pounding sound, the demon pulled back its tongue, then shut its mouth. The tentacles holding Uldyssian tightened

painfully. If it could not eat the human, the Thonos evidently would be satisfied with crushing him.

Then, Uldyssian sensed a figure near him. His mind flashed back to the jungle, when Mendeln had come to his rescue against the ancient demonic presence. He had wondered where his brother was in all this; should not the fate of the edyrem have been integral to Rathma and the dragon? Would not Mendeln himself have sought to come to his sibling, just as Uldyssian would have come to him?

Something happened, but what it was, a weary Uldyssian could not say immediately. He only knew that the tentacles abandoned him. Air filled his lungs. The Thonos bellowed angrily—

“Mendeln...” Uldyssian managed, shaking his head to clear both it and his vision. “Mendeln, I knew you’d—”

It was not Mendeln.

Achilios stood next to him, firing one arrow in rapid succession after another. Those bolts, those seemingly insignificant bolts, struck true against each of the visible orbs of the demon.

But more to the point, after they hit...they dissolved in an explosion of energies far more deadly than the point of an arrow.

Six eyes were ruined and blue lightning crackled from each. The Thonos shivered and many of its limbs flailed about without reason. Achilios, standing like some dread guardian, pulled arrow after arrow out of his quiver...and never seemed in danger of running out.

Recovering from his shock, Uldyssian called out, “Achilios! What —”

Without missing a shot, the archer turned his gaze to his old friend.

Achilios’s eyes blazed white. Expressionless, he said, “Go, Uldyssian. You are needed.”

With that, the blond figure returned to firing. For the first time, the Thonos showed some hesitation. Several tentacles wiped at the eyes already targeted. Others began churning up the ground.

Uldyssian, still uncertain as to whether to leave Achilios alone against this behemoth, recognized immediately what the Thonos was doing.

“It’s going to burrow!” he shouted to the hunter. “It’s going to attack from underneath!”

To this, Achilios remarked in the same monotone voice as before, “No. It will not. Go now, Uldyssian.”

This time, Uldyssian listened. He did not understand this latest face of his childhood friend, but what mattered was that Achilios did appear to be holding the Thonos at bay. At the very least, Uldyssian hoped to salvage the edyrem and then return to help the archer.

If all of that was yet possible...

The struggle with the morlu had turned very desperate. The one beacon of hope centered around Saron. The Torajian, looking almost as fierce as the helmed warriors, wielded a long, slim sword and at first appeared to be simply using skill against his insidious adversaries. However, each time the sword hit, a flash of blue accompanied the slice. In this particular case, the result was the toppling of a morlu's head the next moment.

But other than those surrounding Saron, the edyrem were in retreat. The morlu and surviving Peace Warders trod over the bodies of the dead, eager for more victims.

Pausing to catch his breath again, Uldyssian glared at the encroaching villains. He spied a morlu about to slay a Torajian and fury took over.

The morlu let out a hiss as the blade in its hand melted. That hiss turned to a howl as the creature's gauntleted hand followed. Uldyssian did not stop until he had reduced the morlu to a bubbling mass, an act that took him all of three breaths.

The edyrem realized that he was with them again. Their confidence visibly rose. Under Uldyssian's guidance, the line began to strengthen, even push back in some places the servants of the temple.

Then, a Parthan whom Uldyssian had thought slain rose up again, ax in hand. Next to the man, a Torajian also stood. Uldyssian cheered at this sight...until a Peace Warder whose throat was a bloody tangle of sliced flesh and sinew joined them.

All three turned to face the defenders...and all three began attacking.

All three were dead...

Serenthia's anxious voice filled his head. *Uldyssian! The slain! Theirs and ours! They're rising! All of them! They're rising!*

They were indeed. Everywhere that he looked, Uldyssian saw that those who had been killed were now standing. Some of them lacked limbs, even heads. Whether edyrem, Peace Warders, priests, or morlu, those still intact enough were now back on their feet.

And all now marched with the rest of Lilith's servants against Uldyssian and his followers.

Twenty-One

He could hear her laughter again. Lilith's triumphant laughter. Each time, she stole hope away from him.

But if she thought that this would finally break him, finally make Uldyssian surrender the souls of the edyrem to her, than the demoness was sorely mistaken.

The corpses shambling toward his people were no more than shells. The spirits of the men and women they had once been had moved on. That was made even more evident by the fact that none of the resurrected edyrem used their powers. All kept to the weapons at hand. When Uldyssian probed one of the figures, he sensed nothing living.

That settled it for him. Feeling no regret for what he had to do, Uldyssian waved his hand toward the first several walking dead. They immediately collapsed. However, before he could sigh in relief, the bodies stumbled to their feet again, weapons once more ready to add the living to their ranks.

As powerful as he was, Uldyssian could not play this endless game against Lilith and the priests. He would have to destroy her creatures en mass, but that risked him injuring or even slaying his followers in the process.

But there was no other choice. Each moment that he hesitated, more of those who had put their lives in his hands fell victim...and then rose to add others.

He had only one hope, but it risked everything.

Then again, the battle was already beyond concerning himself about that.

Pull back...he commanded the edyrem in front of him. Quickly! Those that can, create a shield! Separate us from them, if only for a few feet!

They obeyed without question, which made him cringe inside. In their minds, Uldyssian had come to save them again. However, he could no longer promise that would be the case.

His heart beat as he waited for them to do as he said. Yet, although in some places they managed to succeed, in others it proved impossible to disengage with the morlu and the Peace Warders. Uldyssian could wait no longer. He prayed that he could control his powers enough to keep from adding too many of his companions to

the casualties. Worse, he did not even know if what he planned would accomplish anything except delay defeat.

He focused on the mass of bodies—

The resurrected dead suddenly began falling. Not merely those of the dead edyrem and Peace Warders, but also the slain morlu. They simply collapsed as if a gust of wind had blown all of them over.

But this miracle was not due to Uldyssian. Startled, he looked around for the source, but could not find it.

Then, it occurred to him not to waste this moment.

Strike! he ordered the others. *Strike before they recover!*

To their credit, the edyrem reorganized immediately. Saron and the other commanders led them forward. The surviving Peace Warders and morlu readied themselves for what was surely the last confrontation. They had every confidence in their might despite this abrupt turnaround.

But then a voice called out in a language that Uldyssian did not understand. He did recognize that voice though, and his heart leapt at its sound.

A figure in black, one hand holding high a gleaming white dagger, shouted again in the direction of the attackers. Mendeln, his pale face drawn and his voice strained, repeated the same words over and over.

And as Uldyssian watched, in the front line one morlu after another let out hisses of dismay...and fell as dead as the once animated bodies.

The Peace Warders and priests faltered, stunned as their most potent weapon proved vulnerable. Those morlu behind also slowed, for the first time their movements showing uncertainty and even, perhaps, a little anxiousness.

Uldyssian glanced around quickly and saw that nearly everywhere the foremost morlu had collapsed. He immediately urged the edyrem to press the fight harder and they answered his call. Peace Warders and morlu who dared to push forward found their advance blocked by the invisible barriers. Balls of energy flew at the ranks of the Triune, downing more than one foe. Uldyssian directed the efforts of his best converts against the priests, harrying the robed figures to such a point that some started to retreat.

But those who did were not allowed to get very far. One screamed as thorns burst out over all parts of his body. He toppled into one of his fellows, who pulled back with blood from two puncture wounds staining the side of his garments.

It had been through no effort of the edyrem that this had happened. Uldyssian sensed Lilith's anger, as, of course, did the priests. Out of fear of their supposed Primus, they returned to the struggle.

Uldyssian rewarded their decision with a net of vines that dropped

down and roped the necks and limbs of three. Using the Thonos for his inspiration, he had the vines tightened until they strangled his adversaries.

As if thought of it had somehow caught the demon's attention, the Thonos let out a roar so loud that Uldyssian knew that it had to be right behind him. He barely scattered out of the way as the behemoth *staggered* past. Many of its tentacles hung limp and there were burning sores where most of the eyes had been. Arrows pincushioned the beast, each having struck a vital part.

Of Achilios, there was no sign, but Uldyssian could not concern himself with the archer, for the Thonos, each step more ragged than the previous, began listing dangerously. Uldyssian calculated its path and quickly warned those in the way.

Move! Move now! he repeated over and over until the last edyrem had managed to leap aside.

The Thonos unleashed a last, drawn-out roar...and tumbled over. Uldyssian did what he could to adjust the giant demon's descent.

Their ranks tight, the Triune's minions could not clear out of the way. Some did manage to flee, but most were caught under the falling behemoth. Hardened Peace Warders cried out in panic, then were crushed beneath the massive body. Other warriors escaped the corpse, but were batted aside by the many flailing limbs that followed. Even the morlu did not escape, several of them tossed like leaves.

With gusto, the edyrem charged back into the area. Only the morlu there still had any fight left in them, but their numbers kept dwindling as Mendeln shouted out the mysterious words at the top of his voice.

Then, a familiar buzzing sound filled the air. Uldyssian let out a gasp and reached out, but his reaction was too slow. The deadly Peace Warmer weapon flew at his brother, its thrower expertly aiming for Mendeln's chest.

At the last moment, Mendeln twisted, his free arm blocking the way. Unfortunately, flesh and bone were not enough armor against such a sinister weapon. The spinning blades cut *through* his arm midway between the shoulder and the elbow. Mendeln's arm literally dropped off.

The blades cut through his garments and left a shallow cut along his side, but that was finally the end of it. It said something for Mendeln's stamina that he still stood even as blood poured from the ruined arm. Uldyssian's brother gazed down at the lost limb, then touched what was left near his shoulder.

The bleeding halted just as Uldyssian joined him. "Let me help you with that!"

"There is no time!" Mendeln argued. His pale face had grown even

more so, but otherwise he seemed himself. The massive wound looked half-healed already. “We must press! We must end this here!”

But it’ll not end here! Uldyssian realized. *It’ll go on as long as Lilith continues to haunt us!*

Nevertheless, he let Mendeln have his way. Once again holding high the unsettling blade, Uldyssian’s younger sibling renewed his chant. More and more morlu toppled over, the demonic strings guiding them severed forever.

Uldyssian turned to seek Achilios, but still his friend was nowhere to be found. There *was* Serenthia, however. She utilized her spear and her powers as if born to them. Each time a Peace Warder or some other adversary perished at the point of the weapon, another fell to a fire ball, a storm of dust, or some other conjuration.

Serenthia! he called. *Where is Timeon?* Like Achilios, there was no trace of him.

Dead! A morlu caught his eyes turned elsewhere and his powers defending another!

The Parthans were growing fewer and fewer and even though this night had witnessed both his brother and his childhood comrade return to his side, the loss of Timeon only emphasized again how Uldyssian’s past was being eaten away. It did not help that he saw Jonas—once scarred Jonas—commanding others in the name of his only blood relation.

Damn you, Lilith! he silently swore. No, this would never end! If she could not use the Triune, the demoness would slip away to find some other method by which to seize the edyrem...seize *all* of Humanity for her own.

He could not let her. He could not let her continue. Uldyssian imagined her before him, imagined her in his grip—

And so she *was*.

The daughter of Mephisto stood right in front of Uldyssian, her expression as wide-eyed and wondering as his. She wore no guise, appearing before him as the reptilian temptress he had last seen. Uldyssian did indeed hold her as he imagined, hands clamped painfully tight around her upper arms. Their faces were less than a foot apart.

Unfortunately, it was Lilith who recovered first. Her gaping mouth transformed into the familiar, beguiling smile with which as Lyliia she had first captured his heart.

“Why, Uldyssian, my love! If you wanted me in your arms again, you should’ve just told me.”

Something snared him around the throat, constricting like a serpent. Too late he recognized it as her tail.

“We should go to somewhere more private, don’t you think?”
They vanished from the battle.

Serenthia felt Uldyssian’s surprise and his subsequent dismay, but the struggle against the Triune prevented her from coming to his aid. She sensed Lilith’s awful presence and almost screamed in horror when both he and the demoness disappeared.

But even then there was nothing that the merchant’s daughter could do, nothing but continue to fight and kill Peace Warders, priests, and morlu, each of whom seemed immediately replaced by two more. That Mendeln had returned and had stripped many of the morlu of their parody of life had helped stave off the onslaught, but that was all. The servants of the temple were better trained for this chaos; Uldyssian’s followers were still, for the most part, farmers, merchants, and the like.

Yet they fought with far greater determination and skill than even she could have imagined...but would it be enough?

Two morlu converged on her. However, before Serenthia could deal with them, a succession of arrows caught the pair in both their eyes and their throats. Each strike was accompanied by a flash of energy.

The morlu dropped.

“Achilios?” she blurted. Through Uldyssian, Serenthia had been alerted to the archer’s presence, but unable to sense him herself, she had only half-believed. Now...

Now the dark-haired woman fought harder. Achilios was with her, even if she had yet to actually see him. He was with her. Whatever the outcome, victory or defeat, they would be together.

Whether in life or in death, they would be together...

Had someone informed Mendeln that he would have the wherewithal to not only survive the severing of his arm but go on as if nothing had happened, he would have thought them mad. Now, he thought *himself* mad...but did not care. Uldyssian was gone, taken by the demoness. Mendeln could not tell what was at this moment happening to his brother, but it could be nothing good. Lilith had surely had enough of his defiance; she would see to it that he would pay for it and pay dearly.

I wanted to stand at his side, Mendeln bitterly thought. *A short time that certainly was...*

He considered calling to Rathma and Trag’Oul, but for reasons that

he could not explain, held back. Instead, he used his wound and his bitterness to power his work. One morlu after another morlu—the fiends bereft of the demonic essence that animated them—dropped before him. Each casting took its toll upon him, though, something he did not outwardly show. Yet, there were still morlu, too many morlu, and their savage blades continued to get through some edyrem's shield, splattering the innards of that hapless person over other defenders.

They must all be cast out if we are to win...or even survive...they must be!

A morlu broke through. Rather than attack from behind those battling the Triune, the bestial warrior headed for the children and weaker within the circle. A monstrous grin stretched across the fiend's unnatural countenance. At the same time, two more slipped through other cracks in the ranks of Uldyssian's followers. The edyrem had proven themselves several times over; they were just outnumbered and lacked the foul expertise of their foes.

They must be cast out! But he was the only one with that ability and had so far proven wanting. All that the dragon and Rathma had shown or taught him meant nothing. None of their methods or spells had focused on such a monumental and desperate task.

Yet, Mendeln had to try. It still did not mean that the edyrem would be saved, but to simply give up...

And that suddenly gave him an idea of how to come to his brother's aid. It, too, was a desperate notion...

He pulled the small bone fragment from his pocket. Without hesitation, he said to it, "To my brother. To help him against Lilith."

The fragment vanished. Mendeln hoped that he had not just made a terrible mistake, but he had not had any other choice.

That left the morlu with which to deal. Bracing himself, Mendeln ran through the words in his head. They had to be arranged just so. He no longer followed his mentors' examples, but his own.

If the Balance decrees it, Uldyssian's brother thought. Then it will work...

And if the Balance did not...Mendeln did not want to think about it.

He held the dagger up and began shouting. His spell was his own variation of what he had used already, but now amplified. Yet it was not the words of power alone that he needed. Mendeln threw his will into it, threw everything that he was into it. The morlu were an abomination; they had to be cast out...

From the dagger burst a blinding light which caused Mendeln himself to cry out in surprise. He staggered, suddenly feeling as if his very life were draining from him.

The light spread out among the edyrem and then their enemies. Mendeln watched with hope, with anxiousness, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, he nearly gave in to his growing weakness.

But then, a morlu flung back his helmet. The ghoulish warrior, his horrific, scarred face fully revealed, took an awkward step in Mendeln's direction...and then spun around and crashed to the ground.

The one next to the first fell over. A third followed suit.

It is happening! Mendeln cheered. *It is happening!*

However, it was still happening too slow and the stress on him was becoming overwhelming. He fell to one knee even as an entire row of morlu simply collapsed.

Mendeln cursed his failing body. He also cursed Rathma and Trag'Oul for leaving all of this to him. They spoke of the need to maintain the Balance, but how could that happen if the edyrem were slaughtered here? Of what use was the Balance, then? Why could the dragon not once come out of hiding and act, rather than endlessly preach what others should do?

You speak the truth, came the familiar voice suddenly. *You speak the truth, Mendel ul-Diomed...*

It was as if Uldyssian's brother had been asleep all his life and only now had awakened to the forces with which the dragon—and Rathma, Mendeln sensed—filled him to overflowing. Mendeln rose full of hope, full of power.

Power which he focused on the dagger...and his spell.

The light shone so bright that surely even those awake in the capital should have seen it. All around him, the combatants froze in astonishment.

And the morlu—all the morlu—finally died...again.

They fell by the dozens, by the scores, and Mendeln was certain, by the hundreds. As he turned around, he saw only their corpses littering the already blood-soaked jungle. Thankfully, he knew that these beasts would not rise again, for he had taken that into account when he had derived his own spell.

They are all finished, Trag'Oul declared. *They are no more...*

The dragon and Rathma withdrew from him. Mendeln teetered, then dropped to both knees. His arm fell to his side and as it did the incredible illumination cast by his dagger vanished.

Another voice entered his thoughts, yet one that he welcomed, for it did not speak to him alone, but *all* the defenders.

Have at them! Serenthia commanded. *They're confused! Lost! Now's the time to strike—for Uldyssian!*

A spontaneous cheer arose from among his brother's followers and even Mendeln added his own ragged cry to it. The edyrem swept out toward their adversaries, beating back the Peace Warders and countering the spells of the priests. In addition to the clash of arms, there were balls of energy, feats of enhanced strength, and more. The once invincible ranks of the Triune splintered. Peace Warders fought, but not with much hope.

Mendeln wanted to do nothing more than sleep, but he fought to his feet. Sleep could only come when—assuming no new horror reared its ugly head—Lilith's minions were utterly broken. Only then...

He sensed a priest casting. Mendeln shoved the dagger forward and muttered. In his mind, he saw the priest's spell turn on the man. A dark shadow enveloped the caster, a shadow that literally ate away at him until nothing remained. The priest did not even have time to scream.

There were still many to fight, but the odds were now with the edyrem. Their confidence continued to swell—that, and the fact that they knew in their hearts that this was the decisive moment.

And so they fought. Mendeln, aware that he could do no more for his brother, fought with them. At that moment, he both respected and hated the Balance, for he knew very well that the edyrem needed to win, even if it meant losing Uldyssian. Sanctuary could survive without his brother. Mendeln could only hope that by sending the bone fragment to wherever his sibling was that it would help Uldyssian survive.

Of course, considering just what the piece contained, considering the potential for evil within it, it was also possible that Mendeln had done just the opposite...

Twenty-Two

Uldyssian stood in a maze.

He knew that this was some part of the supreme temple, but other than that he was entirely without a clue. Each time he used his powers to try to escape, nothing happened. He did not appear somewhere else, and this time, he could not summon Lilith to him. Why that was, the son of Diomedes did not know, but it boded ill for his efforts against her.

With nothing else left to him, Uldyssian continued down the stark, stone corridor. Torches in the walls lit the way, not that there was anything to see. Still, with memories of his encounters in the temple in Toraja still fresh, he kept a wary eye on the ceiling, the floor, and the walls. Uldyssian knew that such distraction only worked in the demoness's favor, but could do nothing about it.

The corridor ended at another one that gave him the choice of turning left or right. Having already chosen the right at the last intersection upon which he had come, Uldyssian picked the left this time. In truth, a part of him was suspicious that he would end up in the same place regardless of which direction taken. There was something entirely unnatural about this maze, not at all surprising since it was demonic in origin. While it reminded him of Lilith, it was very likely that it had been designed by her brother, Lucion.

After only a few steps down the new hall, Uldyssian suddenly turned and swung his fist into the nearest wall. Both shielded and powered by his gifts, his fist slammed a tremendous hole in the stone. Cracks spread from the broken gap along much of the nearby area. Uldyssian pulled back his hand to inspect the damage he had created

And the wall mended itself. The stones shoved back in place and the cracks sealed over. In less time than it had taken him to do the deed, all trace had disappeared.

He swore. Uldyssian had thought that perhaps by taking an impulsive action he would catch Lilith by surprise. Her trap, though, was proving very, very intricate.

Uldyssian had immediately materialized in this place, his former lover nowhere to be seen or sensed. He still berated himself for having reacted too slowly to her sudden materialization. After all, he had

been the one who had so much wanted her there...

Try as he might, Uldyssian could not repeat that act. Again, he did not understand why. Lilith had to have done *something* to him—

There was a clatter just ahead.

It sounded as if someone had dropped a small object. The clatter echoed for a brief time, then silence reigned once more. Uldyssian could see nothing, though. Was this a new torture of Lilith's? Did she plan to keep him distracted with sudden, random sounds? Judging by the way his heart beat now, Uldyssian thought that perhaps the demoness had a good point.

He took a few tentative steps toward where he had heard the noise. Uldyssian did not notice anything different at first, but then he saw a small, oddly pale stone lying against one of the walls. For some reason, Mendeln came to mind. Despite not trusting why that should be so, Uldyssian bent down to take the piece.

There was a coldness to the odd stone that nearly made him drop it. Yet, again he felt that his brother had some sort of tie to this find. Straightening, Uldyssian inspected it.

The way you seek is behind you...

Uldyssian smothered a gasp. He *knew* that voice, knew it so very well. Never had he expected to hear it again, especially emanating from a stone.

No...he saw it for what it actually was. As a farmer raising animals, he should have recognized it instantly. It was a bone.

And the voice had belonged to dread Malic.

The way you seek is behind you... the voice repeated.

On a hunch, Uldyssian muttered, "Why are you here, priest?"

At the command of your brother...and the pleasure of vengeance...

The first part Uldyssian understood, the second confused him at first. He could not see why Mendeln would send the spirit of Malic after him if all the latter desired was retribution against Uldyssian. Then, the son of Diomedes remembered just *who* had been responsible for the man's death.

"So, it's Lilith you're after..."

The way you seek is behind you...

Malic's cryptic response made Uldyssian frown. He did not entirely trust this ghost, even if Mendeln *had* been the one to send him. Still, he had no other choice than to believe the instructions...for the moment.

Returning to the previous intersection, Uldyssian headed in the direction that he had rejected. There was no further contact by the priest's specter and so Uldyssian assumed that he should keep walking until it said something.

Indeed, the voice arose at the next junction. *To the left you must go...*

“How long is this going to take?”

The distance shortens, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, even if the danger also heightens...

“Which means?”

This was the plaything of my lord Lucion...a wrong step, a wrong turn...and you will have your hands full... The voice went silent after that and Uldyssian decided not to bother seeking more. Other than the directions, all Malic offered were riddles. Again, Uldyssian vowed to remain wary of the ghost.

Malic did not speak again until they had reached another corridor. Uldyssian followed the new path and after a few minutes noticed that the way was growing darker. In addition, a sense of claustrophobia took hold of him.

Recalling the tricks of the Worldstone’s cavern, Uldyssian rejected the feeling. As the torches grew farther and farther apart, he summoned a light of his own.

The changes in his surroundings did not bode well. He resorted to the bone fragment for answers. “What goes on here, priest?”

Remain steady on the path, the ghost replied very succinctly. It was almost as if Malic stood next to him. *Touch not the walls, whatever the need...*

While he was certainly willing to obey, Uldyssian wanted a reason. “Why? What’ll happen if I—”

The stone floor tilted, sending him sliding to the left.

Beware! The wall!

Still clutching the fragment, Uldyssian grasped with his free hand a depression between two stones in the floor. His momentum ceased. He held on tight. Oddly, the path behind him looked absolutely normal. With the utmost caution Uldyssian pulled himself toward it.

The floor shifted, sending him rolling on into the darkened areas. This was not some clever use of mechanisms; the only manner by which the floor could move in so many directions was magic.

He concentrated, willing the floor to become even again. The angle at which he tumbled lessened, then disappeared altogether.

Uldyssian paused to catch his breath.

The floor shifted to his right.

The wall, fool! Beware the—

It was too late. Uldyssian, already near one side of the corridor, had no chance to react before his shoulder slammed into the wall. The stone there gave way. He dropped into emptiness...

And a moment later, landed on a harsh, slick surface.

Rise up! Rise up, you dolt! Malic all but shouted in his head. *They come! They come!*

Savage grunting filled Uldyssian's ears. On instinct, he rolled away from their source.

A heavy battle-ax chopped into the ground near his head.

Ending on his back, Uldyssian stared up into the black pits that were the eyes of a morlu.

Uldyssian thrust his hand toward the monstrous figure. With a roar of anger, the morlu went flying back, finally crashing into a jagged wall far away. The body fell several dozen yards before hitting the bottom.

But as Uldyssian rose from dealing with this threat, he saw that Malic had been correct when the ghost had used the word "they."

He was in a vast underground chamber filled with morlu.

Uldyssian had been certain that Lilith had thrown all her resources into attacking the edyrem. He would have never believed that she had kept so many of these hideous creatures at hand should Uldyssian escape her trap. Then again, perhaps she had merely held on to this band for other ventures, such as against Inarius, conspicuously absent in all this struggle.

Whatever the reason, the morlu howled at the sight of Uldyssian and charged him. Like ants, they flowed toward the intruder from every direction. Some waved weapons, others merely sought to tear him apart with their hands.

He thrust the fragment into his shirt and then met the first of his attackers. Uldyssian grappled with the morlu just long enough to gain a hold, then twisted the warrior around in time for the ax of another to bury itself deep in the first's chest regardless of the armor.

Tossing aside the body, Uldyssian sent a ball of fire at the second attacker. Perhaps because of the morlu's undead nature, the creature immediately became an inferno. Uldyssian kicked him into another, then turned to his left, where his most imminent foe now stood.

That morlu received what the initial one had. Driven by the human's powers, the armored beast flew up, then dropped over a lava flow Uldyssian had spotted. The morlu sank out of sight, the lava sizzling loud.

But even with such success, the horde was pressing him harder. With a cry of defiance, Uldyssian swept his arm across the chamber. The ground around him exploded and morlu by the scores were ripped apart or tossed far away. Uldyssian did the same with his other arm, with just as dramatic results. He continued this twice more, clearing for a great distance the ground around him.

Morlu bodies and parts lay scattered everywhere. Driven by his

frustration and fury and not having to fear harming friends, Uldyssian had been able to take down nearly as many of the creatures as had been part of the entire attack on his followers. He did not fear the survivors; all Uldyssian wanted was a moment to catch his breath and then he would rid this place of the last of the vermin.

But then he saw an arm lying over one body slide off that and roll to its former wielder. Once there, it reattached itself. Uldyssian looked to the other side and beheld the ruined throat of another heal itself.

As that happened, something emerged from the lava. Armor blazing red and flesh seared, the morlu he had tossed into the flow also stalked toward him.

Everywhere, the demonic warriors healed and rose. It was an even more horrible tableau than that from the battle, yet Uldyssian knew that it had to be related.

It is the Kiss of Mephisto that raises them, but the demoness has amplified its powers, came Malic's voice. *Seek the black gemstone in the center! Seek it!*

Morlu blocked his view in that direction. Inhaling, Uldyssian clapped his hands together. The crashing sound bowled over his foes...

There, at last revealed, was what Malic claimed the source of the warriors' regeneration. A gleaming black gemstone nearly as tall as him and embedded in a triangular column of red-streaked marble.

That is it! It must be destroyed! Quickly!

But the morlu perhaps understood what he intended, for they came at him in a frenzy, screaming and leaping and swinging whatever weapons they carried. They converged on Uldyssian from all sides.

Despite that, he concentrated only on the huge gem. Compared to the Worldstone, the task proved easier. Uldyssian located within it a fault and threw all his will into that one place—

With a shattering sound worthy of the colliding Shards of the Worldstone, the Kiss of Mephisto was no more.

The morlu did not slow even then. Their hatred for him was absolute. Foam splattered the mouths of many and their shrieks would have frightened the dead. The morlu lived only for his utter annihilation.

Just as he had done before, a grim Uldyssian waved his arm across his view. He threw morlu left and right, into walls and into the lava flows. Those that got closer he burned with flame or speared with solid light. When even that did not halt the tide, Uldyssian seized one morlu after another and crushed their throats or broke their necks or backs. Blades cut wounds in him that he forced to heal. Gauntleted hands grasping for his limbs or neck slid off as if seeking to hold oil.

Uldyssian pictured Lilith in his mind as he tore through the ranks of the morlu. Each one slain was her.

And then...and then there *were* no more morlu to fight.

It took Uldyssian nearly a minute to register this astounding fact. Around him lay the bodies. No part of the floor of the cavern seemed untouched by corpses or blood. Yet, the beasts of the temple did not rise to fight him again. The morlu were dead, this time forever.

Well played...Uldyssian ul-Diomed.

Uldyssian grunted, this the first time that he could sense respect in Malic's voice. However, there was no time for congratulations. There was only the hunt for Lilith.

Seek above, to your right. There you will find the way...

Malic's directions led Uldyssian to a door. No longer concerned about stealth, Uldyssian sent the door flying inward.

He found two more morlu within, both slain by the door's explosion. Uldyssian trod over their bodies, already sensing that Lilith was close at hand.

With the aid of Malic's ghost, Uldyssian emerged into what the spirit indicated was the Primus's personal chambers. There was not much to see other than the elegant throne in the first and innermost chamber. The Primus, after all, had been only a facade for Lucion and his sister.

He reached the doorway leading out, but there Malic suddenly spoke again. *Hold the bone high and ready!* the ghost demanded. *And be prepared to throw!*

Uldyssian tensed. This extreme difference from previous instructions told him that Malic knew of some powerful threat without that even the son of Diomedes could not sense.

With his thoughts, Uldyssian flung open the doors—

Throw! commanded Malic urgently.

Guided by his power as well as his arm, Uldyssian unleashed the bone. It soared out of the Primus's chambers and down the darkened corridor beyond. Then, just as Uldyssian was about to lose sight of it, the piece abruptly veered to the right.

He heard the bone strike something, followed immediately by a pained grunt. That, in turn, was followed by a heavy thud that Uldyssian recognized all too well.

Darting out, he sought for the location. Sure enough, a figure clad in the robes of a Dialon lay sprawled in the corner. Blood from a wound to his forehead marked where the fragment had hit.

Uldyssian started to reach for the bone—and then straightened. She was *here*.

“Poor, poor darling Durram! He so wanted to be of assistance to his

Primus!"

Forgetting the fragment, he looked around. Try as he might, though, Uldyssian could not pinpoint exactly where she was. However, he finally thought he knew why. This was the main temple of the Triune, designed and built to Lucion's expectations. Surely, like the ancient structure in which Lilith had planned to turn all the edyrem, this place was situated on a *nexus*, one of the points where the angels and demons had first begun to create the world. Lucion had usurped the forces of that nexus for his temple and manipulated them to mask the evil inherent in this place.

And in masking the evil of the Burning Hells, those forces now also masked Lilith from him.

"Ah, my dear, sweet Uldyssian!" the demoness mocked. "Always so near victory, always so willing to let it slip away from you..."

"Not this time, Lilith!" he returned, pushing his will to the limits in order to find her. "Not this time!"

"But, my love! Your brother and your friends are dead and your precious edyrem are even now being marched back here! How much greater a defeat can there be?"

For a moment, her words sparked fear and despair in him, but then Uldyssian recalled just who spoke. "No more of your lies. No more of your games."

With that, he plunged toward where he believed she was.

Suddenly, there were heavy doors in his path. Uldyssian, prepared for any barrier, threw his power into a blast that decimated them. His momentum sent him through a second later.

He landed on all fours much like a cat...and then stared wide-eyed.

Uldyssian crouched in one of the entrances to the huge chamber where the faithful gathered prior to the sermons of their respective priests. He knew the design of the other temples enough to know that he should not have yet reached this place. Once again, Lilith had played him.

The towering statues of two of the false spirits loomed over him. That of Mefis—Lilith's father, Mephisto—was oddly absent. The pedestal gave some indication that the statue had broken off at some point. Somehow, Uldyssian doubted that it had been an accident.

Recalling Toraja, he kept a wary eye on the remaining two figures. Lilith wanted him in this chamber for a reason. Therefore, everything within was suspect.

And just then, her laughter filled the room.

"The game is done, my dear, sweet Uldyssian!" she called from everywhere and nowhere. "You *have* been a marvel and all that I imagined you'd be, but I would be finished with this, for I've so much

more to do!"

She was here...and yet, she was not. Uldyssian probed every direction. Each time, he felt that he had found her, but then some other location would then take prominence.

"Show yourself," he growled. "Show me where you are!"

"Why, I am right here, my love."

Lilith appeared...and appeared...and appeared over and over and over. A hundred visions of the demoness materialized, followed by hundreds more.

That they were merely illusion was the obvious thought to Uldyssian. Yet, when he sought to tell the true from the false, *all* of the figures seemed to him as the former. None were merely figments...

"Hold me in your arms one last time," they mocked in unison. A thousand Lilith's pursed their lips. "Kiss me one last time, my love." They started toward him, hips swinging, bodies moving suggestively. "Come lay with me one more time..."

They could not all be real, yet they were. Uldyssian tried to focus, but the battle, his personal fight with the morlu...so much had happened to drain away his strength and concentration. He knew that the demoness had planned this. A weakened Uldyssian was less a threat to her and possibly, in her mind, more manageable. After all, she still wanted his edyrem and he was the easiest path to that.

Then, Uldyssian thought about the fact that Lilith had gone to the trouble of sending him through the maze and against the morlu below. She had expected him to somehow survive. He felt certain of it. That, and her shock when she had first materialized in the midst of the jungle battle, revealed to him that the demoness respected his abilities more than she let on. In fact, Uldyssian suddenly believed that she was even a little frightened. Why else go through all this elaborate spellwork? Could Lilith not have done with him as she wished after stealing him from the others?

Perhaps not...perhaps she had indeed needed him *much* weakened first...

The horde of Liliths converged upon him, all with arms outstretched. Uldyssian suspected that if he fell prey to her here, he was lost forever. Somehow, he had to find the one and only Lilith...

In his fogged mind, a question arose. This was the supreme temple, the focus for the life of the sect.

Where, then, were all those who should have been within? Lilith had sent only lesser priests, Peace Warders, and morlu into the jungle. Where were the acolytes, the high priests, the guards, and all the rest that kept the temple functioning but of whom many were not trained warriors? The only one that he had seen had been the one Malic's

bone had brought down.

He suddenly knew.

And knowing it, Uldyssian *demand*ed in his mind to see the reality.

The Liliths melted away. In their place stood the faithful. Priests, priestesses, acolytes, Peace Warders, and more. The whole of the sect was represented.

But Lilith was not among them.

She had to be here. Uldyssian reminded himself just who he was hunting. It would not be impossible for her to transform herself at the same time that he was ripping away her other illusion.

The servants of the Triune must have realized, too, that they were no longer disguised, for they came at him like a maddened mob. In their minds, they still served the Primus and Uldyssian knew that nothing he said would shake their faith in that knowledge.

But then, there were none here who did not know what the sect truly was, that it was actually a cult following the monstrous dictates of the lords of the Burning Hells. All concern for these fellow men and women abruptly faded. They cared nothing for the lives of his followers nor the innocents who came to listen to the “holy” sermons.

As he had done with the morlu, Uldyssian swept away the ranks of the faithful. Screams echoed throughout the vast chamber as bodies went flying in all directions. Several flew high in the air, others crashed against the walls. Uldyssian left no direction unscathed. All those serving the Three were tossed aside like the refuse that they were.

And that left one figure still standing. A nondescript follower in robes of gray and brown.

“Hello, Lilith,” Uldyssian remarked.

Her instinct for defense had this time played against her, but only momentarily. The human guise vanished, the demoness now in her full glory. She leapt up into the air, hovering momentarily.

“My dear, sweet darling,” Lilith cooed. “You must be so weary! It’s a wonder that you can even stand...”

In truth, he was *very* tired. Even the last spell had taxed him too much. Lilith, on the other hand, appeared strong and fresh.

“I will miss you, my love,” she continued. “But all things must come to an end! I—”

“Be silent, Lilith.”

“Now, Uldyssian...” The demoness’s aspect grew dark. “That is no way to talk to me. I fear that this time I must truly punish you...”

And suddenly, she stood before him, claws out and tail whipping. One pair of claws tore through his ruined garments and his flesh and this time Uldyssian could not entirely heal those wounds. He wanted

to fall over, but knew he could not.

His hand caught her wrist just before the second pair of claws would have raked his throat. He twisted Lilith around and threw her high into the air toward the statue of Bala. Lilith struck the top hard, cracking the head off.

But even as the huge chunk of marble crashed to the floor, the demoness vanished, reappearing behind Uldyssian. Both her hands thrust forward, seeking his spine.

However, Uldyssian had already sensed where she planned to materialize and so turned before that. He seized her hands in his own, clamping them together before sliding down to take the wrists tight.

“It ends now, Lilith,” he stated flatly.

A rumbling arose, one that shook the entire temple. Those followers of the cult who were still conscious and able to move began fleeing through the exits. They had no more reason to stay, after all. There was no sign of the true Primus, and Lilith had at last been revealed as their manipulator.

“Now dear, sweet Uldyssian—”

She got no further. A huge, marble hand grasped her, pulling her arms to the side and against her body. She squirmed and wriggled, but could neither vanish nor escape. Uldyssian dared not permit that to happen again.

His breathing grew more ragged. This had to be done quickly. Uldyssian even had his doubts that he would be able to save himself, but that would be a small price to pay.

The hand pulled the demoness high above him. Another joined it, grasping over the first. The two remaining statues had the demoness imprisoned.

“It ends now,” Uldyssian repeated to her.

Lilith bowed her head in defeat...and more than a dozen of the quills that were her tresses shot forth.

Already teetering, Uldyssian allowed his powers to guide him. Almost of its own accord, his hand came up. A golden light formed in front of him.

Borrowing from the evil of her brother, Uldyssian sent the quills back. Lilith could do nothing. Wherever she was visible, they pierced her scaled hide. Two in her stomach, three in her chest, more in her shoulders. Even her throat.

A green ichor splattered the statues' hands. Lilith let out a gurgling gasp, yet even then she still did not perish.

“My sweet Uldyssian...” the demoness called out. “Think what you'll do without my...my embraces...”

His expression did not change. “I already do.”

A fierce tremor shook the temple. Many of the Triune had already fled, but others still fought their way out. What neither they nor those who had already left had yet to realize was that all outer entrances had been sealed off.

“Do you recall the last time we were in such a place, Lilith?” he managed to say without once pausing for a desperately needed breath. “Do you remember?”

She said nothing, but her eyes burned with hatred. Her tail weaved back and forth, a sign to Uldyssian that, despite her own condition, she was very much a danger yet.

“The last time, it was only by the strongest will on my part that the building held long enough for my people to escape.”

By now, he could hear some of those beyond the chamber shouting and clamoring for anyone to let them out of the temple. They would shout to no avail. Uldyssian had made certain that no one could come to their aid.

He took a very deep breath. “Now, even if it’s the last thing I can manage, I’m going to bring this one down.”

The rumbling magnified a thousandfold. Veins spread like fire over all the walls, the ceiling, and even the marble floor. Great chunks started to fall.

“Goodbye, Lilith. For the very last time.”

She hissed.

Her tail, stretching impossibly, reached all the way down to snare him. Caught unaware, Uldyssian fell on his back.

But his own spell had already come to fruition. The entire roof—and all three towers, Uldyssian knew—collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of tons of stone and wood fell upon the chamber and all else. The shrieks of the faithful momentarily outdid even the roar of the collapse.

Lilith, too, shrieked, as Bala and Dialon tumbled into one another... and on top of her in the process. Her tail unwound from around Uldyssian, flopping madly before vanishing into the rubble left in the wake of the demoness’s destruction.

Uldyssian could pay no more mind to her fate. He struggled only to keep himself alive. Even as marble pieces ten and twenty times his size sought to crush him, he fought with all he could to keep a shield all around him.

But the stone kept pressing and pressing and Lilith’s deeds had sapped him of more strength than he had let on to her. The effort of bringing down the gigantic structure was too much. Uldyssian felt the stone pushing closer, tighter—

And then...the pressure eased. Uldyssian took advantage of that

easing, straining to make his shield stronger, larger. Despite his body screaming to let it lie there, he shoved himself to his knees, then, when that worked, to his feet.

Only then did it come to him that, other than the dust, the collapse was over.

The ruins lay sprawled for as far as he could see. The dust made it impossible to know more about the destruction he had caused, but Uldyssian sensed a wave of emotions coming from the north. The capital, just beyond his physical view, had felt the collapse and now, no doubt, saw the cloud rising above to obscure the stars. It would not take long for riders to come out to see what had happened. The mage clans likely already knew.

Uldyssian's legs almost gave way. Fearful that he would leave matters incomplete, he quickly surveyed the area for any living sign of Lilith. After a moment, he sensed her trace some distance from him...a trace that faded away as Uldyssian monitored it.

She was *dead*.

It was over.

The son of Diomedes let out a sigh...and fell. As he did, his fading mind wished that somehow he could return to the others. That was all that mattered, returning to them.

And so you shall... came the voice of Trag'Oul. *And so you shall...*

Twenty-Three

There had been many losses, but many more lived who should not have. Mendeln and Serenthia saw to the comfort of all the edyrem, feeling that, in Uldyssian's absence, they should do whatever they could.

Despite the blood, despite the losses, there was an aura of joy among those there. They had vanquished their enemies. The few Peace Warders and priests to survive had fled into the deep jungles, their wills broken. They had nowhere to go, for everyone had felt the sudden destruction of the great temple. Jonas, climbing up a tree, claimed to have seen a dark cloud obscuring part of the sky in that direction. Daylight was coming soon, but no one needed to verify his claim...for suddenly Uldyssian himself was back among them.

Although Uldyssian appeared alone, Mendeln knew that the dragon had lent his brother aid in the return, a second startling act by a being who insisted on complete secrecy when it came to his existence. Truly, Mendeln thought then, the Balance must have seen the good need for Uldyssian.

He and Serenthia came to Uldyssian's side. The merchant's daughter brought Mendeln's brother something to drink. Uldyssian nodded his thanks, then, when he had taken as much as he could, he eyed the two and said, "You know?"

"Yes..." answered Mendeln. "You are free of her."

But Uldyssian shook his head. "Never." He suddenly looked around. "Achilios?"

It was Serenthia who responded to this. "He was here...and then he was gone. None of us saw when he left."

Mendeln remained quiet.

Nodding, Uldyssian reached for a helping hand. With their assistance, he stood. Around the trio, the edyrem—summoned silently by Uldyssian—gathered.

"The Triune is crushed," he stated bluntly. There still existed some minor temples, but the cult had depended upon the main temple for their influence. Well aware now how things worked, Uldyssian knew that what little remained would fade away.

"The Triune is crushed...and now the Cathedral awaits."

No one cheered. No one lamented. They accepted both parts as fact, nothing more. Whatever Uldyssian wanted of them, they would do

their best to achieve.

“Clear the dead away and send to me the wounded,” he next ordered. “Then, everyone sleeps.” As they left to obey, Uldyssian looked at his brother. His eyes went to the wounded arm.

An arm Mendeln again wore whole.

“It shall be explained,” replied the younger brother.

“The dragon?”

“Rathma.”

Nodding, Uldyssian asked, “Will they help us more? Or is it just us, again?”

Mendeln considered before answering. “I believe that they have seen that they must. I believe that the scales tip in favor of our needs. The Balance will demand it of them, just as it demands much of us.”

That satisfied Uldyssian, even if all his brother had said was not exactly clear to him. “Then, tomorrow we march.”

Both his brother and Serenthia bowed their heads in agreement.

“Tomorrow,” they repeated.

With that Uldyssian turned to help his people, but although his face showed only pride and concern for those who had followed him...it was the face of Lilith that would burn forevermore in his mind.

And in that, at least, the demoness had triumphed.

Rathma materialized atop the rubble that had been the temple. He had come to determine the truth as to whether or not his mother was actually dead. More than most, Rathma knew Lilith to be a cunning vixen. She might fool Uldyssian into believing her no more, but he did not believe that she could do so with her own son.

Yet as he looked over the ruins, he found nothing more than the mortal had. Rathma located where Lilith should have been buried and when he probed, he found a still corpse. Not much was left of it and by the time this land was cleared—assuming that Sanctuary would still exist—there would be nothing recognizable as inhuman.

“So it is very much farewell this time,” he murmured. “I would say I am sorry, Mother...but we know the truth.”

With that, he disappeared. There was no time to mourn the dead, especially the dead who did not deserve it. Rathma had other concerns.

He still had a father, after all...

He was gone. She had fooled even her ungrateful wretch of a child. Despite her horrific wounds, Lilith managed a smile.

The body that he and Uldyssian believed hers had been that of a minor priestess. Lilith had managed to save herself at the very last moment; then, with her will pushed to its limits to shield her, the demoness had managed to crawl free of the devastation. Still, even she was willing to admit to herself that it had been luck for her to survive, much less keep the two from noticing her.

But Lilith would turn that luck back in her favor. She would regain her strength and this time she would repay Uldyssian and his companions with the most insidious tortures. Even her son would learn what it was to earn her wrath—

A shadow fell across her...a shadow that made the demoness start, for she had sensed nothing. Yet, Lilith knew exactly to whom that shadow belonged.

She tried to move, tried to escape...but his power held her fast.

“Release me!” Lilith hissed. “Release me...Inarius!”

AFTER I HAVE DONE SO MUCH TO SAVE YOU?

“Save me? Ha!” But even as she sought to deny it, the demoness realized that he spoke the truth. All her good fortune made terrible sense. Lilith had believed herself responsible, but no...

The angel stood above her in all his glory. Lilith both hated and desired him. *YES, SAVED YOU, MY ONCE LOVE! I DID PROMISE, THOSE MANY CENTURIES AGO, THAT I WOULD NEVER STRIKE YOU DOWN NOR LET ANOTHER DO SO!*

Yet, he had done even worse, in her opinion. Lilith vividly recalled the emptiness, the void in which she had been sentenced until her fortunate escape.

Hissing, the demoness tried to attack, but it was like a fly seeking to batter a horse. Inarius dismissed her weakened assaults as less than nothing.

I WOULD NOT EVEN LET OUR OFFSPRING FIND YOU, FOR HE WOULD HAVE FELT OBLIGATED TO FINISH WHAT THE HUMAN THOUGHT DONE! The hood shook back and forth. NO CHILD SHOULD SLAY HIS MOTHER, NO MATTER HOW UNGRATEFUL THAT CHILD NOR HOW EVIL THAT MOTHER...NO, IT IS ONLY I, ALWAYS, WHO MUST METE OUT JUSTICE WHERE YOU ARE CONCERNED...JUSTICE WITHOUT DEATH, OF COURSE, AS I PROMISED!

“S-Spare me your sermons—”

AS YOU WISH. Inarius raised one palm. In it formed a gleaming sphere so transparent that it was almost invisible.

The demoness’s expression turned to horror. “No! Inarius! Don’t—”

But in the next second, Lilith floated inside the tiny sphere, her size reduced accordingly.

I HAVE REMEDIED WHAT WAS DONE INADEQUATELY BEFORE,

the winged being said without emotion. *THE MISTAKE SHALL NOT BE REPEATED. GOODBYE, MY ONCE LOVE.*

She spat at him although the sphere prevented it from having any result. “You think Sanctuary yours? You see what this human has wrought! He’ll bring you down, too, Inarius!”

HE WILL NOT, FOR IT IS THROUGH MY EFFORTS THAT HE HAS DONE YOU IN. Before she could argue more, Inarius added, *FAREWELL, MY ONCE LOVE...FAREWELL...*

Lilith screamed and cursed, but her voice—as well as she—grew tinier and tinier. The sphere became a marble, then the size of a pea.

And then, for all mortal purposes, shrank so tiny as to become nothing.

CONSIDER YOUR FATE FORTUNATE, MY ONCE LOVE, Inarius said to the emptiness. *CONSIDER IT FORTUNATE, COMPARED WITH THAT AWAITING THE MORTALS WHO WOULD DARE THINK THEMSELVES MORE THAN THEY ARE!* He spread his astonishing wings wide and took to the air, staying above the wreckage of the temple only long enough to peer in the direction of the mortal, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, and his naive supporters.

THEY WILL FIND OUT THAT NOTHING HAS GONE ON THAT I HAVE NOT COMMANDED...BUT THEY, LIKE YOU, WILL FIND THAT OUT ALL TOO LATE...

And with that, he soared off, unseen, to his sanctum, to decide the fate of his world.

*The Sin War
Continues in
The Veiled Prophet*

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THE SIN WAR

BOOK THREE

THE VEILED PROPHET

RICHARD A. KNAAK



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THE SIN WAR



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Prologue

...And with the destruction of the main Temple of the Triune and the vanishing of its master, Uldyssian, son of Diomedes, and his edyrem then spread across the land, purging the last major traces of that sect. The flames of justice and vengeance burned bright together to devour much of what remained of the Cult of the Three.

But there still stood the Cathedral of Light, and in the vacuum left wherever the Triune had once preached, there came the missionaries of the Prophet. Never did they confront the edyrem, but ever were they there afterward to help rebuild and give relief.

Focused on his growing powers and certain that the Cathedral could not stand against the righteousness of his cause, Uldyssian blinded himself to what he considered such menial efforts. Having fought zealots and demons, he did not understand the subtle works of the angel, Inarius, who was known to the masses as the handsome, youthful leader of the sect. Even the dragon Trag'Oul and Inarius's own estranged son, the nephalem, Rathma, were ignorant of the angel's aid to their struggle against the Triune.

But if that was their sin, then so was it also Inarius's, for he failed to realize that others had taken notice of the struggle for the soul of the world called Sanctuary...others who might desire to take for themselves the prize, or choose instead to destroy everything.

And no one, not even the veiled Prophet or Uldyssian himself yet understood just what the son of Diomedes was gradually becoming...

One

The man in the middle of the pentagram shrieked as Zorun Tzin deftly used his magic to peel away another area of skin. The patch, a tidy three inches by three, methodically rolled back without hesitation. It left in its wake a bleeding gap that revealed the muscle and sinew underneath. Streaks of blood flowed from the gap down the naked figure's body to add to that already decorating the floor.

The gaunt, bearded mage was not at all bothered by the splatters on the stones. They would be gathered later for other uses having nothing to do with the dark-skinned Kehjani's current interest. The Council of Clans had managed to cease their feuds long enough to implore him to discover what he could about the fanatics pouring across the land, fanatics with powers unbelievable.

That these—edyrem, they called themselves—had brought down the mighty Temple of the Triune was not the point. The mage clans were more than happy to be rid of the powerful sect, which had been the first to wrest influence away from the spellcasters. Indeed, that had been in great part the cause of the first feuds, as clans had struggled to seize from one another what stature remained.

No, what disturbed the clans so much that they had been able to agree to something at last was the simple fact that the edyrem were nothing more than untrained peasants for the most part. They were farmers, laborers, and the like, and yet their leader promised them abilities that the mages had painstakingly toiled for most of their lifetimes. Not only that, but the use so far of those powers revealed a recklessness that endangered so very much. It was clear that the edyrem were a hazard and had to be contained.

And who better than the mage clans to do that? Under their strict guidance, these mysterious powers could be properly explored and exploited.

"I say again," Zorun rasped. "You saw the outsiders bring down an entire temple with only their bare hands! What words did they chant? What gestures did they make?"

"D-don't know!" bellowed the prisoner. "I—I swear!" The man was bald and still fit, despite the mage's interrogation. He had once been a temple guard, one of the few who had escaped the fanatics' grasp. It had taken Zorun some weeks of scrying to locate even this individual, so deep underground had any survivors of the Triune gone into

hiding. “I swear it is s-so! They did—did n-nothing like that!”

With a gesture, the Kehjani had the square of skin finish peeling. A new shriek of agony escaped the captive. The orange-sashed mage waited impatiently for the cry to die down before speaking again. “You cannot expect me to believe that they just willed something to happen. Magic does not work that way. It takes concentration, gestures, and long practice.”

From the prisoner, he received only gasps. Frowning, Zorun Tzin slowly paced around the pentagram. The octagonal chamber in which he had spent the last day interrogating the former guard was meticulously clean and neat. Each vial, each parchment, each artifact was set properly on the correct shelf. Zorun believed that neatness and order were paramount to success in the arts. Unlike some mages, he did not let clutter overwhelm him, nor did he allow dust and vermin to render his sanctum piggish.

Even when it came to himself, the Kehjani sought to be immaculate. His brown, wide-shouldered tunic and flowing pants were freshly cleaned. He kept his beard trimmed to a proper shape and length. Even his thinning gray hair was artfully oiled back.

The manner in which he ran his own life perhaps gave indication of why Zorun pursued the secrets of the fanatics as he did. They were a slovenly, disorderly factor, and their spellcasting appeared to be based on whim and emotion. In truth, when he had been approached by the council for this task, Zorun had already been delving into the situation in secret. Of course, he had not informed them of that; otherwise, they might not have granted him the list of demands he had given or promised even more should he succeed.

No, there was no *should*. Zorun did not fail.

“You saw the Ascenian leader, this Uldyssian ul-Diomed, he is called. Is this true?”

“Y-yes! Yes!” screamed the guard, sounding almost grateful to be able to respond to any question. “Saw him! Pale! H-he is—w-was a farmer, they say!”

“A digger in the dirt,” the spellcaster muttered disdainfully. “Little more than a beast.”

The figure above the pentagram let out a gurgle that might have been agreement.

“It is said that he brought down the temple himself. Did you see that?”

“N-no!”

The response caused Zorun to grow more exasperated. “You are wasting my time, then.”

He gestured, and the bleeding figure suddenly gasped. A choking

sound escaped the stricken guard. He tried to reach for his throat, which had now swollen monstrosly around the apple. Yet, even had the Kehjani's captive been allowed to move his arms—which, of course, he was not—he would have been able to do nothing to stop Zorun's work.

With one last garbled cry, the guard slumped. Zorun Tzin finally let the body drop to the floor, where it sprawled, quite ungainly, over the pattern.

“Terul!”

At his summoning, a hulking Kehjani with too small a head came shambling into the chamber. He wore nothing but a simple tunic. The face much resembled one of the small primates considered sacred by many lowlanders, although Zorun saw as little divinity in them as he did in his servant. Terul was excellent at obeying direct orders without question, the reason the spellcaster had first picked him out of the slums.

Terul grunted, the closest he ever came to speaking. His too-small head dipped down to acknowledge his master.

“The body.” Zorun had to say no more. The servant understood exactly what he desired. Terul hefted the dead guard as if the latter weighed as little as air, utterly ignoring the blood that stained his skin in the process. The giant had been trained by his master always to clean up afterward.

Terul shuffled out with the corpse. There were many passages in the sewers coursing underneath Kehjan the city. All eventually emptied into the river beyond the walls. From there, the wild lands beyond—also called Kehjan by the ancients—would deal with the refuse.

Glancing at the pool of blood and the trail following in Terul's wake, Zorun muttered an incantation and drew the proper symbols. He watched with immense satisfaction as the crimson liquid smoothly and cleanly began rolling toward the pentagram, leaving not a trace behind. How many on the council itself could perform such a feat? It had taken Zorun ten years to perfect that spell....

He grimaced. No doubt, this Uldyssian ul-Diomed could do the same without more than a glance.

This must not be...or, if it must, then it shall be I who am able to do it, not some fool of a peasant!

Zorun seized a cloak and departed from his sanctum. There were those he needed to visit to gather the necessary items for his work. That would require some tricky bargaining that he had no desire for those who had hired him to know about. A mage's secrets were more valuable than simple coins or jewels. They were worth lives.

And if Zorun's plans fell into place as they should, one of those lives would be that of the Ascenian, Uldyssian.

"You must speak to your brother," Rathma encouraged, his generally toneless voice now hinting at concern. "He is growing reckless as his power further manifests itself."

"What can I tell him that is new?" Mendeln asked with a shrug. They were both contrast and similarity, the pair. Rathma was taller than most people and with perfect features that might have been chiseled by a master sculptor. His skin was far paler than that of any other living person, and that was made more noticeable by the cowed and hooded black cloak and robes he wore.

By comparison, Mendeln ul-Diomed, was average in height and more plain of feature. He had been a farmer's son, albeit not so good a farmer himself. His broad nose made him feel ugly in contrast to the one with whom he spoke. His dark hair seemed lighter against the pure black of Rathma's.

Yet in their manner, in their speech, and in their clothing, they were more like brothers than he and Uldyssian. Mendeln wore a cloak and garments similar to Rathma's, and his flesh, while bearing some pink tint, was still far paler than normal—especially for an Ascenian, who should, like his brother and Serenthia, be baked nearly as dark as the lowlanders.

It was not so surprising, though, that Mendeln should be very like Rathma. The latter had chosen the younger son of Diomedes to be his pupil, the first mortal to learn the path walked by one who was son of both an angel and a demon.

"He thinks he is being very practical," Mendeln went on. "Hints of the Triune's stirring again forced him once and for all to stamp out their kind. That makes sense to him, as it does to many of the others. Even I understand the logic."

Rathma's cloak swirled around him, despite there being no wind. Mendeln often wondered if the garment were alive, but he never asked.

"But he thus remains blind to my father," the tall figure reminded him. Rathma was an Ancient, one of the first generation born to the world known to a select few as Sanctuary. Like him, all of that generation had been the progeny of refugees from the High Heavens and the Burning Hells, who had forsaken the eternal conflict and bound together to seek a new existence.

They had found that existence, for a time, in a place of their own making, masked from the sight of the two great powers. Yet, in

finding common cause, the refugees also had begun their downfall. Familiarity brought with it the intermingling and, with that, Rathma's generation—the first humans.

In the beginning, the new children had seemed harmless enough, but when they had started to manifest powers—powers unlike those of their parents and with unlimited potential—the angel Inarius, leader of the group, had declared them abominations. Only barely had he been convinced by a few of his fellows not to act instantly. He and the other refugees finally had agreed to retire to their separate sanctums carefully to consider the fate of their children.

But among them was one who had already made her decision. Inarius's own lover, the demon Lilith, secretly stalked the other demons and angels, slaughtering them one by one. In her madness and ambition, she saw herself as the savior of the children and also, thus, the only one with the right to mold their destiny.

A destiny that saw her as mistress over *all*.

However, she had dearly underestimated Inarius. Discovering her treachery, he cast her out of Sanctuary. Then, using the gigantic crystal called the Worldstone—which had been created to keep Sanctuary hidden—he had altered the artifact so that it caused the innate powers of the children to decline until they became so dormant as never to have existed.

Some of Rathma's generation, called the nephalem, had protested... and they had been crushed. The rest had scattered, Rathma himself forced to hide beyond the mortal plane. Over the centuries, most of his kind had vanished, and the generations that followed grew up in ignorance of the birthright that had been stolen from them.

But no more...

Mendeln turned from Rathma as he considered the other's words. The two of them stood deep within the jungles of Kehjan, well away from where Uldyssian's vast following camped. The scent of smoke that wafted by did not come from the huge encampment but rather from Urjhani, a town about half a day to the south. There, Uldyssian had tracked down some of the last priests to a minor temple, which he had afterward burned to the ground.

"My brother is painfully aware of the angel," Mendeln finally responded. "Just as he will always be painfully reminded of Lilith."

The demoness, despite Inarius's confidence, had managed to return from exile. The angel, distracted by the incursion of the Burning Hells into his world, did not notice her slow, subtle manipulation of the Worldstone. That manipulation had reversed his intentions, awakening the potential within the many humans now inhabiting Sanctuary. Lilith had chosen Uldyssian for her pawn, stirring through

violence and lust his latent powers.

In the end, however, she had failed to turn him to her cause. Uldyssian had fought her in the main temple, and although her body had not been recovered from the rubble that was all that remained of the towering edifice, everyone, including Rathma, was certain that she was at last dead. Unfortunately for Uldyssian, who had once loved her as the woman Lylia, the demoness would never truly be gone.

“And for that, I can but apologize to him. I knew my mother’s evil, just as I knew my father’s sanctimony...and for generations, I did nothing but cower.”

Rathma had hardly cowered, but Mendeln said nothing to assuage his mentor. Still...“I shall bring up the Cathedral’s missionaries to him again. You said earlier that there are already a number of them en route to Urjhani, and we left that place only the other day. That would have to mean that they were dispatched from the Grand Cathedral itself even before we reached the town.”

“Which is not the first time, either, Mendeln. My father almost appears to know Uldyssian’s path even before he does.”

“I will make mention of that also.” But still Mendeln did not depart. He suddenly surveyed the jungle, as if expecting some beast to leap out at them.

“I am not hiding him,” remarked Rathma with a rare show of frustration. “I am not pretending my ignorance of your friend Achilios’s location. Both Trag’Oul and I have searched, but of the hunter there is no trace.”

“But you were the one who raised him from the dead!”

“I? I only influenced the situation. You are the one who brought Achilios back, Mendeln. Your gift and your link to the realm of afterdeath are what enabled him to return.”

Rather than begin an old argument over, Mendeln left the shadowy figure behind. Rathma did not call after him, and the human, aware of his mentor’s ways, knew that the Ancient had already melted into the shadows.

Neither of them had uttered what both suspected concerning Achilios’s disappearance. The one time in the past when they had discussed the possibility, Mendeln had nearly lost all heart. What point was there in trying to change the world, if the world was soon to be no more?

It was all too obvious to Uldyssian’s brother what had happened to the hunter. Rathma had detected no demonic traces in the vicinity of Achilios’s last known location. The absolute absence of any such trace could mean only two things. One was that Inarius had seized Achilios for some plot against them, a dire notion indeed. Yet, as terrible as

that might be—especially to Serenthia—there was a second scenario that made the first welcome by comparison.

What if *another* angel had stolen away the hunter?

They all knew what that meant. The Burning Hells were already aware of Sanctuary and had been so for centuries. They had let it survive because of their interest in the potential of using humans as a turning point in the eternal war. The Temple of the Triune had been created by the demon lords—the Prime Evils—in order to bring Mendeln’s race into the fold. Had not Inarius taken personal umbrage at their act—seeing Sanctuary and all in it as his—humanity might even now be marching into battle against the angels.

But now, if the High Heavens did know of the world, they were sure either to fight to possess it or simply to destroy it so that it could not be of use to the demons. That thousands of lives would perish was not of interest to either side.

It is essential that we find Achilios, Mendeln determined as he reached the edge of the encampment. *For all our sakes, it is essential!*

His thoughts were violently interrupted by an invisible force against which he collided. As he rubbed his nose, two figures appeared—one with the swarthy skin of a lowlander, the other as pale as any Ascenian tended to look next to one of the locals. Mendeln recognized the second as one of the dwindling number of Parthans, Uldyssian’s first converts. There were perhaps a little more than a hundred of them left, where once there had been many times that number. Being among the earliest of his brother’s followers, the Parthans had, unfortunately, faced monstrous dangers before having the chance to truly begin to come into their powers.

“Ah! Forgive us, Master Mendeln!” blurted the Parthan. “We couldn’t know it were you!”

The other edyrem nodded nervously in agreement. Whether from the lowland jungles or the highland forests, nearly all of Uldyssian’s flock treated Mendeln with a combination of veneration and fear. The fear came from Mendeln’s calling, which dealt much with the dead. The veneration...well, he was wise enough to understand that it originated simply from the fact that he was their leader’s sibling.

Oddly, a small handful had begun to come to him for learning, but Mendeln did not set any store by their interest. They were just morbidly fascinated by certain aspects...at least, that was what he told himself.

“You need not apologize,” he told the pair. “I left without giving word. You did as you were commanded.”

They opened the way for Mendeln, watching with some visible relief as Mendeln passed. He pretended not to notice.

And, as if by passing the guards, the younger son of Diomedes had entered a new realm, suddenly the area around him was filled with magic. Colored spheres of energy dotted the vast camp, as if arranged for some festival. Yet none of them was secured by string, but rather floated above those who had cast them. There were still fires, but mainly for cooking, not for illumination.

But the spheres were not all. As Mendeln strode through the throngs, a continual array of magical displays caught his gaze. One swarthy lowlander had created a glowing stream of energy that entwined around itself like a serpent. Another edyrem levitated a number of small stones, then proceeded to have them move around as if in the hands of an invisible juggler. A fair-haired Parthan woman created a spear from empty air, which she threw with perfect accuracy at a distant tree. The spear hung embedded for a moment, then dissipated as she forged a new one.

These were but a few examples. The many spells cast by the edyrem varied in power and skill, but that the seemingly insignificant faces around him—faces drawn from all castes and occupations—were those of people mastering what had once been available only to a select few was both astounding and troubling to Mendeln. Common folk such as himself were supposed to live out their lives toiling in the field. They were not supposed to become powerful sorcerers.

And that was what troubled him, even as he watched one inventive youth create for his smaller siblings—yes, Uldyssian’s “army” even included children—bright butterflies that flew in a dozen different directions. In some ways, many of those who followed his brother were naïve about the potential they wielded. At best, they saw it as a tool, like a hoe, not as something that could possibly either turn on them or brutally maim one of their own.

Perhaps I am being too harsh, Mendeln considered. *They have fought for what they believe in and have been forced to slay those who would make them their slaves and puppets.*

Yet his misgivings did not go away. Despite everything, Mendeln felt magic was something that needed to be studied carefully and used with the utmost consideration. One had to grow into its use and learn to respect its dangers.

Then, ahead, there arose a soft, comforting blue glow. Mendeln hesitated but finally stepped toward it. He had no reason to fear the source. After all, it was only Uldyssian.

Even amidst so much magic, one could feel his brother’s presence. A large group of edyrem sat or stood in a circle around the area Uldyssian had chosen for his bed. Mendeln could not see his brother, but he could sense exactly where Uldyssian was. Without hesitation, the younger sibling strode into the crowd, which immediately took

notice of his presence and began to open a path for him.

And barely had Mendeln made it halfway when at last he caught sight of Uldyssian.

The sandy-haired figure had the strong build and looks of a country farmer, which, of course, Uldyssian had been. Quite good at it, too. Broad-shouldered and square-jawed, with a short, trimmed beard, the elder sibling was handsome in a rough-hewn way, and that helped him appeal to others. He did not look in the least like one of the haughty priests or fiery prophets with whom most of his followers were familiar. He was one of them, the common folk. He had prospered, and he had suffered, his greatest loss that of all his family save Mendeln years before to plague. At that time, Uldyssian had turned from one missionary to the next, seeking salvation for his loved ones and receiving nothing but empty words and suggestions of donations. That tragedy had given him a fierce hatred for sects such as the Triune and the Cathedral even before both had gone hunting for him.

Uldyssian sat atop a log, talking earnestly to all. Mendeln did not have to listen to know that Uldyssian was speaking words of encouragement to his flock, explaining what walking his path meant. His words all had great merit, but too often, Mendeln's brother did not follow them himself. Of late, Uldyssian had been letting his incredible abilities take command of him, not the other way around.

Urjhani was the latest example of that. Uldyssian had intended to capture the priests, not slay them. There were questions about their true masters, the demon lords, that he had wanted to ask. Yet, when one had struck at the edyrem in a desperate attempt to stave off the inevitable—an attempt that had been easily deflected—Uldyssian had angrily hit back.

What had once been the priests had been strewn for yards, each having *exploded* from the inside. Uldyssian had shrugged off the situation as if he had intended this end from the start.

"They were Triune" was the reasoning with which he cut off any other protest from Mendeln. That said, Uldyssian had ordered the final temple burned down so that no memory would remain of the sect.

Now, the same man who had so casually torn apart those living souls and burned their temple dismissed his followers with a genial nod. The glow muted but remained strong enough to be noticed.

Only one figure stayed behind: Serenthia, daughter of the merchant Cyrus, who had been one of the first slain by Uldyssian's powers. That had not been his fault, naturally, Lilith having manipulated the situation to bring about such terrible results. Serenthia was a beautiful woman, with long black tresses and bright blue eyes. Like Uldyssian's her once-pale skin was bronzed. In contrast to the brothers, she wore

the loose-fitting, flowing clothing of the lowland regions. The spear in her right hand was a constant companion, and if anything marred her beauty, at least in Mendeln's opinion, it was the dread determination in her expression.

"Mendeln." Uldyssian rose and greeted his brother as if the latter had been gone for days. "Where have you been?"

"Beyond the boundaries."

"Ah." Some of the older sibling's pleasure faded. "Who was it this time? The dragon or *her* spawn?"

By "her," he meant Lilith. "Rathma, yes. He warns of his father—"

The aura abruptly blazed bright, causing some nearby to start. However, all eyes quickly turned away again. "As he does every time! Does he think I keep no watch for that one? Rathma could serve us better by standing at our side rather than running off into the dark after he whispers another fearful warning."

The glow continued to increase in intensity. Mendeln felt his own anger stirring but kept it in check. "You know he risks as much as any of us, Uldyssian...and you need not hate him for being Lilith's progeny. He regrets that more than you can ever imagine."

The blue muted again. Uldyssian exhaled. "You—you're right. Forgive me. The past few days've been long ones, haven't they, Mendeln?"

"To me, the days seem to grow longer and longer with each breath I take."

"I miss the farm."

"As do I, Uldyssian. As do even I."

Serenthia finally broke her silence. Gaze narrowed at Mendeln, she muttered, "And any word of Achilios?"

"You know I would speak if I knew even the slightest hint."

She thrust the bottom end of the spear into the ground. A brief scattering of red energy marked where the spear struck. Of all Uldyssian's acolytes, Serenthia was the most powerful. Some of that strength, unfortunately, was fueled by her concern for the hunter, and the longer he remained missing, the more careless she became. It was becoming not an uncommon trait among the edyrem, and as the only relative outsider, Mendeln appeared alone in noticing it.

"Achilios will find a way to return to you," Uldyssian interjected. "He will, Serry."

But she looked uncertain. "If he could've, he would be standing with us now!"

"You wait and see." Uldyssian put a hand on her shoulder, which, long ago, would have made the merchant's daughter turn red. She had adored him most of her childhood, only discovering her love for

Achilios just before the demon Lucion had slain their brave friend.

Turning back to Mendeln, Uldyssian added, “And, as I said, I keep wary about the angel, but what can he do against us that the Triune didn’t? Rathma’s hidden so long it’s hard for him to think that—”

There was a shout from the edge of the encampment and a host of angry voices that did not belong to the edyrem.

Uldyssian stared into the sky. He frowned, looking more frustrated than surprised.

“We’ve guests,” he told Mendeln and Serenthia. “Many uninvited guests...”

“Triune?” she asked, almost eagerly. Serenthia hefted the spear, looking as if she intended to throw it now.

“I don’t know, but who else can it be?” Uldyssian headed toward the direction of the cry. “Well, whoever they are, they’ll receive the same greeting we always give the Temple.”

Cyrus’s daughter smiled, a look that reminded Mendeln just briefly of the expression often on her countenance when she had been possessed by Lilith. She raced eagerly after Uldyssian, the two quickly leaving Mendeln well behind.

He did not move, although it was not because he shirked battle. Rather, as the sounds of struggle rose, Mendeln wondered at this desperate surprise attack. It hardly sounded like the Triune, assuming that they could muster any size force now. Yet the only other choice in his mind was Inarius. Mendeln, though, could not conceive of something so overt, so simple, from Inarius, whom Rathma had often described as one who worked behind the obvious, manipulating events as he desired—

Mendeln swore, suddenly rushing to join the others. Whatever this attack appeared on the surface to be, it would have another, far more dread reason behind it—one that it might already be too late to stop.

Two

Uldyssian was not in the least bit anxious as he rushed to the edge of camp. He and his followers had been attacked in such a treacherous manner before. Lilith had managed to mask the Triune's Peace Warders and the even-more-nefarious morlu through spellwork until the enemy had been nearly as close. Yet that had still not enabled her to defeat the edyrem.

Indeed, aware of their present surroundings, Uldyssian had set into motion enough security that should such a trick be repeated, the encampment would remain secure. Now that precaution was paying off.

Sure enough, a line of edyrem stood facing the jungle, out of which poured not the disciplined, silver-garbed Inquisitors of the Cathedral, but rather a horde of ragtag figures not unlike his own army. They were armed with not only swords but work axes, pitchforks, and a host of other tools turned into weaponry. They shouted and screamed and drove toward the waiting edyrem with what he sensed was strong anger.

"These are neither the Triune nor the Cathedral. These are merely people!" Serenthia declared needlessly. She readied her spear. "That can't be! This must be illusion designed to make us uncertain."

Her suggestion had merit, for illusion seemed as true as breathing to both powerful sects. Uldyssian shoved aside his uncertainty and thrust forward his left hand.

The area before him exploded with pure sound, the force of it barreling through the attackers' ranks as if they were nothing. Men—and women, Uldyssian saw—tumbled through the air, crashing against trees or vanishing into the black jungle. They shrieked as they died, sending a sudden chill through him that, however, did not prevent Uldyssian from striking again.

Next to him, Serenthia aimed and threw. The spear utterly impaled one man and went through him to slay another. As both fell, the bloody spear came flying back to her.

The rest of the edyrem did not leave the battle to the two of them. Another attacker burst into flames. He collided with two others, igniting them. The three, in turn, created chaos among their fellows, as the rest desperately sought to evade even the slightest touch.

Elsewhere, spheres of light lifted men into the air, then dropped

them onto their comrades. Tendrils of energy encircled throats, tightening enough to strangle.

Some of the edyrem's defenses looked mundane, such as the use of bows, but even here, their powers came into play. The arrows, guided by the bowmen's will, struck their targets' hearts perfectly.

The attackers also had their archers, but it startled Uldyssian that they waited so long to use them. There was a whistling sound high in the air, and then the first bolts finally began arcing down toward the edyrem. The skills of the enemy bowmen were questionable, but with so many defenders, they no doubt did not fear too many misses.

Without even a gesture, Uldyssian seized control of the arrows. They turned sharply, heading toward the jungle.

One after another, the bolts struck those converging on the encampment. A line of six men dropped simultaneously, each pierced through the throat.

The ambush was swiftly turning into a debacle, as hardly any of the edyrem had suffered even a scratch. The shields that Uldyssian had trained his guards to create were impenetrable to mortal weapons, something that he was astounded the attackers would not have taken into account. More and more, they seemed exactly as they appeared: simple peasants, farmers, and the like. They were the type who should have been eager to join the edyrem's ranks, not slaughter them.

Yet still they came, their ferocity now touched with desperation. Most were dark-skinned, like the Torajians and many of their cousins, but among them were also the first few light-skinned lowlanders he had seen, so light-skinned, in fact, that they could have passed for Ascenians such as himself. Those were said to be from an area that included the northern part of the capital, but other than Lilith's false identity of Lylia, Uldyssian had seen none in all his time down in the jungle realms.

Still, their similarity to him did not save them from suffering as their darker comrades did. Uldyssian rewarded their base ambush with death a hundred times over. The bodies began piling up in a manner both grotesque and shameful, and yet he had no notion how to put an end to the struggle. The attackers refused to cease coming, and his people, well certain of their victory, had no inclination to end what was becoming pure butchery.

From behind him came words muttered in a tongue Uldyssian did not in the least understand. A faint glimmer arose at his back.

One of the dead attackers leapt to his feet like a marionette whose strings had just been pulled taut. At first, the macabre figure appeared ready to attack the edyrem, but then he whirled about, facing instead his former allies.

A second corpse and then a third did the same. Several others joined them.

The first took a step toward the enemy, and the sight of the dead walking was at last enough to put an end to the assault on the encampment. First one, then several, then *all* the attackers turned and fled in panic. They ran with no rhyme or reason, their only intent to escape what they thought was a rising army of ghouls.

A few of Uldyssian's followers sent balls of flame or flying tree trunks at the stragglers, but the enormity of what had just happened finally began sinking in. The area surrounding the encampment lay littered with bodies, not one of them edyrem. Triumphant cheers arose from the defenders.

Uldyssian turned to Mendeln, the one who had been murmuring in the strange tongue. His brother looked as deathly as the risen corpses, and clutched in his hands was the unsettling dagger that looked as if it had been carved from ivory...or bone. Mendeln held the dagger point down. The blade was the cause of the sinister illumination.

The younger brother turned the blade upward, then muttered a single word.

There was a heavy thud from the direction of the jungle. Uldyssian glanced over his shoulder to see the animated dead dropping in horrific heaps among the other bodies. Some of the edyrem instinctively made signs from either the Triune or the Cathedral, old habits dying hard even in the face of the sinister truth concerning both sects.

"I had to attempt something," Mendeln stated bluntly. "This was becoming tragic and demeaning."

"They attacked us. Ambushed us, if you recall." Still, Uldyssian could not fault his brother for wanting to stop the massacre, even if it was of the enemy. "They got what they deserved."

"Perhaps..."

Uldyssian knew that tone and found himself frustrated by it more and more. "They may look like us, but make no mistake, Mendeln. If they're not Triune, then they're somehow Inarius's minions."

"A pity we can't question any of them," remarked Serenthia, prodding one body. "The edyrem are getting very good, Uldyssian. There's not a living one among these."

"There wasn't supposed to be." Now Uldyssian's own tone startled him, if only for its coldness. "But yes, it would've been good to have someone who could tell us how this came to be. They had the power to mask themselves; that means demons or angels. But they fought like farmers and craftsmen..." He suddenly saw Mendeln's point. "That makes no sense. They should've known that they'd be torn to

pieces by us. Word's spread by now of what we did in Toraja and the other cities where the Triune was...."

"If I may?"

That it was his brother who seemed ready to offer a suggestion concerning the truth behind this attack disturbed Uldyssian more than he revealed. "What?"

Mendeln kept his voice low, for the rest of the edyrem still stood waiting for commands. "Allow me a moment among the—defeated—to choose. Then have the others begin removing the bodies for burning or burial."

"Choose?" Serenthia's face paled. "What do you mean, choose? Choose for what?"

"Why, questioning, of course."

Uldyssian kept his own expression unperturbed as he quickly commanded his followers to begin dealing with the dead. In a whisper to his brother, he added, "Go right now. Pick two...only two. I'll help you bring them to where we won't be disturbed."

"They might not be the ones with the knowledge. It would be best if I could survey a few more—"

"Two, Mendeln! Two. Just tell the others not to touch the pair. No more."

The black-clad figure let out a momentary sigh. "It will be done as you say. I'd best go now, then, while the majority of the dead still lay available."

Serenthia waited until Mendeln was out of earshot before finally saying, "I love him as a friend and almost a brother, Uldyssian, but I worry about him. This is not right, this constant dwelling in spells touching upon the dead."

"I'm not happy about it, either, but nothing he's done has ever been evil. He's saved many of us, including myself."

"And he brought Achilios back to me, if only for a few short moments...." Her eyes moistened.

"I'm keeping watch over Mendeln, make no mistake. If he—or that damned Rathma—do anything I feel crosses the line, I won't let it stand, Serry. I won't. Not even for my own sibling."

He meant it, too, even more than she would realize. If Mendeln's studies brought him to the point where he did something ghastly—at the moment, Uldyssian dared not think just what that might be—then the elder son of Diomedes would have to see to it that the younger was stopped.

Permanently, if necessary. Uldyssian would have no choice.

There was no possible way to keep Mendeln's intentions completely secret, but Uldyssian and Serenthia did what they could to occupy the

edyrem's attention while his brother located the two corpses he desired. The moment Mendeln found them, Uldyssian helped him remove the bodies from the sight of the rest. Serenthia remained behind in order to keep any of the others from wandering over to where the two worked.

"This will definitely do," the younger brother finally decided. They had first carried the bodies out of the encampment, then, one at a time, brought them to where Mendeln believed he could best work. They stood in a slight clearing, perhaps ten minutes away but still too close for Uldyssian's tastes. A stream flowed nearby, and thick, bushy trees draped over them. The dense jungle hid them well from the sight of the edyrem, although some of the more sensitive would likely notice the unsettling energies Mendeln summoned. That, unfortunately, could not be helped, as his brother had already informed him that any notion of shielding their work from the rest would interfere with his questioning.

Mendeln solemnly adjusted the bodies so that they lay side-by-side. They had their right hands on their hearts and their left on their foreheads.

"Why so?" Uldyssian found himself asking.

"Rathma and Trag'Oul taught me that the soul touches both the mind and the heart. I seek to call the souls of these two, and this strengthens that call. It is not necessary for what I seek to do, but it should help simplify matters...as I know you wish me to finish as quickly as possible."

"That would be preferable."

Nodding, Mendeln again brought forth the ivory blade. Uldyssian could feel its wrongness, as if it were not entirely of this world. He was repelled by it yet knew the good it had done for him and his people. Mendeln had sent to their deaths—again—morlu after morlu during the final great battle against the Triune's warriors. So many lives had been saved because of that...

And yet Uldyssian all but recoiled in the dagger's presence. It dealt in death and that which lay beyond death, the latter a thing into which no human should ever delve.

With the blade pointed down, Mendeln leaned over the chest of the first body. In life, it had been a middle-aged man who very likely had been a farmer, just as Uldyssian had. Balding, with a slight paunch but strong shoulders and arms, he looked as if he had merely fallen asleep.

Mendeln brought the tip of the blade directly over the heart. Uldyssian caught his breath, but his brother only began drawing runes over the chest, runes that flared to life in a blaze of white light before settling down to a dull silver. Mendeln drew five more in all.

When that was done, the black-clad figure repeated the process over the forehead, but with different runes. From there, Mendeln slipped to the second body, that of a woman perhaps only two decades old. She was thin, pinch-faced, but still too young in Uldyssian's mind to have been caught up in all of this. Was she truly what she seemed, he wondered? If so, the implications bothered him more than ever.

"Please take a step back, Uldyssian." When the older brother had done that, Mendeln took up a stance at the feet of the two corpses. Now he held the blade up. Words in the mysterious language he had magically learned through Rathma began spilling out, raising Uldyssian's hackles.

Small flashes of magical energy erupted above the two bodies. Still chanting, Mendeln knelt. As he did, he stretched far enough to touch the hand that had been set over the male's heart with the blade's tip.

Uldyssian started as the dagger drew a faint line of blood. He had no longer expected blood. Before he could say anything, though, Mendeln repeated the deed on the woman's hand. Oddly, the glowing dagger looked unstained when Mendeln pulled back.

His brother uttered something else, then waited. The wait was not a long one. A mist suddenly formed over the bodies, one that could not be at all natural. Tendrils grew from it, several darting down to each of the bleeding hands.

The blood just starting to pool over the hands dwindled as if rapidly drying up—or being absorbed.

"Mendeln—"

Muttering again, his brother waved him to silence. More and more of the half-congealed blood dissipated, until nothing remained but the open cuts.

And as the last of the crimson liquid vanished, the mist began to form into a shape—no, *two* shapes.

One vaguely male, the other possibly female.

The two men stood silent, Uldyssian relying on Mendeln for direction. The misty forms coalesced little more, which seemed to frustrate his brother.

"It should have done better," Mendeln reproved himself. "They should have become more distinct, more semblances of their former selves!"

"Can they answer us?" Uldyssian interjected, wanting this to end. "Isn't that the only point?"

"It is the most relevant point." Having conceded this much, Mendeln shook his head at his success, then pointed the dagger at the male shadow. "By what name were you known?"

At first, there was only the hiss of the wind, but then that hiss

became words.

Hadeen...Hadeen...

Satisfied by this result, Mendeln continued. "From what place did you hail?"

T-Toraja...Toraja...

"Toraja?" Uldyssian frowned. "All the way from there?"

"It is some distance, I agree." To the spirit, the younger brother asked, "What was your calling? Were you a disciple of the Triune?"

There was a hesitation, as if Mendeln's questions had proven complicated for the shade. Then: *I tilled the land and grew wheat upon it...my father did, and my grandfather did, and my—*

"Enough! Answer now about the Triune! Were you a disciple?"

No...

"He must be lying, Mendeln; otherwise, why would he have come so far with such dark intentions?"

Shrugging, Mendeln asked of the spirit, "Why did you come with the others to attack us, if not to serve the Triune?"

Again came hesitation...then: *To save the land...to save all Kehjan...*

His answer sounded absurd to Uldyssian. "He wanted to save all Kehjan...from us? We're the ones trying to save everyone!"

"Patience, patience." Despite his response to his sibling, Mendeln, too, obviously did not understand the shade's reply. Mendeln scratched his chin, then turned to the female shape. "You. What name did you bear?"

Vidrisi...

"And did you come to save Kehjan from those in the encampment?"

The answer was as immediate as it was damning. Yes...

Before Uldyssian could interject again, Mendeln asked Vidrisi's specter, "What urged you to this course? What made you join with all these others?"

We knew...we knew that we had to—

"No! What I ask...what I ask is...who was first to suggest it?"

The shade did not answer. In fact, both spirits lost much of what little definition they had. Mendeln quickly began muttering more unintelligible words.

"What is it?" Uldyssian demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Not now!" His brother drew several symbols in the air, focusing most of them at the female shade. Her shape defined again, this time more distinct than before.

But Hadeen's spirit faded back into simple mist, which then dissipated.

"I have lost the one," Mendeln admitted angrily. "But she is still

bound to the spell.” He all but growled to the specter, “Who instigated this march to battle? Who first set you on this course?”

There was no answer at first, but neither did Vidrisi’s shadow vanish. Mendeln drew more runes and muttered more words.

At last: *I recall...I recall the missionary...he said it was so tragic...what the fanatics had done...how many innocents were slaughtered—*

“Innocents?” blurted Uldyssian. “The Triune?”

So many innocents...caught up between the evils of the fanatics and the treacheries of the Triune.... I remember the missionary mourning...and wishing something could be done....

“Enough,” commanded Mendeln to the specter. The shade stilled but did not depart.

The brothers gazed at each other, the answer now known to both.

“Rathma did warn that his father would move behind events, turning them to his favor,” the younger one reminded.

Uldyssian glared at Mendeln, although he was not angry at all at his sibling for bringing that up again. Instead, he was furious at himself for underestimating just how cunning and how thorough Inarius could be.

“The angel’s turning everyone against us, isn’t he, Mendeln? Wherever we’ve fought, his ‘missionaries’ have arrived afterward, tending to the wounded, feeding the hungry, and filling their heads with images of *our* evil!”

“Although we have tried, our hands are not completely clean. Inarius has no doubt magnified those regretful moments until they are all the survivors see.”

Uldyssian let loose with an oath. There was no denying what Mendeln said. Uldyssian had thought that he had at least left Toraja and the other locations with an understanding of the truth concerning the Triune and the Cathedral. He had not expected those who had remained behind to think of him and his followers with love, but certainly there would be respect of some sort.

But human nature, he realized, ever veered on the side of suspicion, suspicion the Prophet’s servants had fed well.

A great burning swelled within him. It erupted so fast and so furiously that it overwhelmed Uldyssian’s good sense. He saw how foolish he had been to think that Inarius would let *him* guide events. Why would the angel grant a mortal foe that? With one cunning move, Inarius had already nearly won the battle. To be able to arouse ordinary folk to such determined anger that they would be willing to march through harsh jungle in order to fight what they knew would be powerful foes was a strength that dismayed Uldyssian.

The burning grew more intense. Uldyssian could not hold it back

any longer.

He stared at the corpses.

Mendeln leapt out of his way just in time. Fire exploded around the bodies, reducing them to cinder in mere seconds. The flames rose high, eating at the nearest trees. The area quickly became an inferno, fueled by Uldyssian's frustration.

The woman's shade dissipated with a mournful wail. Someone seized Uldyssian's sleeve, but it took him a moment to register both his brother and the fact that Mendeln was shouting in his ear.

"You must stop it, Uldyssian! Stop it before you set the entire jungle ablaze!"

But he did not want to stop it, for the more the flames engulfed his surroundings, the better he felt. With some contempt, he shook Mendeln off.

Then something harsh struck his chest, and a new agony overwhelmed him. Uldyssian gazed down and saw that there was an arrow buried deep. His mind fleetingly noted that it was not just any arrow but one of a make familiar to him.

It was also an arrow encrusted with dirt.

Uldyssian toppled.

The assassin leapt through the thick jungle underbrush with a grace worthy of the swiftest predators. Even before he had fired, he had been on the move. It was not as if he sought to keep his anonymity. They would know him well enough, if only because of the arrow and the dirt upon it.

Achilios ran. Not because he wanted to but because it was demanded of him. He had fired, as he had been commanded, but that was not the end of it. Not in the least.

There was still Serenthia....

With his smooth, hawklike features, he had been considered a handsome man back in the days when that was something that seemed to matter. Blond and wiry as a good hunter needed to be, with the swiftness to match, Achilios had been desired by many a young woman around the village of Seram. He, though, only had eyes for one. Back then, it had seemed to him such a tragic thing that Serenthia had wanted not him but rather Uldyssian.

Death had changed much of his perspective.

He paused to listen, one moon-white hand planted against the nearest tree to give him support. When no sound of pursuit arose, Achilios fell to human habit and rubbed his chin in thought. That caused him to gaze with eyes that saw no difference between day and

night at the particles of dirt that covered the skin on the back of his hand.

In a sudden fury, he dropped his bow and rubbed at the dirt. Even though he felt it brush off, the hand grew no cleaner, just like the one with which he rubbed. Achilios did not have to see his face to know that it was the same. His entire body, even his green and brown hunter's garb, was grimy, almost as if he had freshly dug himself out of his grave. No matter how much he cleaned himself, there were always more particles, more bits of ground.

And now, worse, it was not only his flesh that he sought to clean but his conscience, too.

He had just shot his dearest friend, and although it had not been his intention to do it, that made it no less terrible a sin. Another had commanded, but Achilios had not found the wherewithal to refuse. He had bided his time, taken his aim, and, despite his mind screaming for him not to fire or to miss, Achilios had obeyed his master.

Retrieving his bow, the archer glanced back again. Whether the illumination he saw was from the fire Uldyssian had created in his rage or was simply from the encampment did not matter. If he could still see either, then he was too close. He had to continue his flight.

But where am I running to? Where?

He had only one answer to that, an answer he dreaded even to consider. Achilios was to run until there was no chance of being discovered. No farther. It had been commanded that he remain near but not too near. After all, Serenthia was next. Next...

Stricken by that horrifying thought, the hunter tried to let out a cry, but no sound came. Of course, that had nothing to do whatsoever with the gaping, crusted hole where his throat had once been. The magic that had animated him had given him voice, too, but that voice had been stolen, at least for this moment, by the one who now had utter mastery over him.

Thus, with no other choice left to him, Achilios continued to run. His pace would have exhausted to death the most powerful buck or horse, but, needing not to breathe, it was easy for him to keep up the grueling trek. Achilios dodged trees, slipped through narrow passages, and leapt over fallen trunks with an ease he had not had even in life.

And yet he could not feel even the slightest breeze. Even that small relief was forbidden him.

Then, without warning, the hunter stopped. It was not by his choice, and the abruptness of it nearly made Achilios lose his footing. He knew, though, what the extreme halt meant. He was now at the end of his invisible tether. All Achilios had to do to verify that was to look back and see that the glow was gone from view.

One thing that death had not forbidden him was a good, strong epithet. Now that he was far away and thus free to be vocal again, Achilios swore vehemently. The sound would not carry to anyone back near Uldyssian—or likely be heard by anything at all but a few animals—but it was one of the few things that made him feel *almost* alive.

But barely had he gotten the words out before a brilliant light of an unnatural blue appeared before him. Achilios swore again. He tried to notch an arrow, knowing all the while that the shaft would do no good.

A figure appeared in the midst of the light, a figure with wings that were tendrils of energy and who wore a silver-blue breastplate. The rest remained indistinct.

“I’ve done...your...your foul deed...” the hunter rasped. “Let me die now....”

COME...commanded the ethereal form, gesturing with one gauntleted hand.

“I did your damned work!” Achilios insisted. He held up the bow and the notched arrow. “I used these to slay my best friend—my brother in all but blood.” The archer laughed harshly. “*Blood...now* he’s all in blood...”

But the winged figure did not show any sympathy. Achilios’s despair finally drove him to aim and fire. The arrow soared exactly where he desired it, just above the breastplate where the throat would be.

But as had happened the last time he had attempted to slay his persecutor, the shaft flew completely *through* without pause. Achilios cursed yet once more; this very fiend had once enchanted his arrows so as to enable them to slay a huge, tentacled demon called the Thonos. They also had remained enchanted so that they would pierce *any* protective spell Uldyssian might have worn.

And so Achilios had prayed that perhaps they might also still work against the winged figure.

As if nothing had happened, the armored spirit repeated his command. COME...*WE ARE FAR FROM DONE YET.*

To Achilios, that could mean only one thing. “Not her, too! Not Serenthia—”

Against his will, his mouth suddenly clamped shut. The hunter’s legs started forward of their own accord. In the same manner, Achilios’s arms dropped. The bow dangled in his one hand, utterly useless.

Unable to do anything but obey, the undead archer followed the angel deeper into the jungle.

Three

“Uldyssian!”

Mendeln seized his brother just before the latter could strike the ground. Panic such as Uldyssian’s brother had not experienced since his parents dying filled him. He watched the blood pour from the wound, which, if it had not hit the heart, certainly had come close enough.

Uldyssian’s body shook violently, and his eyes gaped up at the dark jungle canopy. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but what it was Mendeln had no idea.

Through the younger sibling’s mind went all that Rathma had taught him, but nothing seemed right for the moment. There had been a spell that had enabled Mendeln to reattach the arm that one of the Triune’s servants had severed, but that would certainly not do. Uldyssian and the others believed that Mendeln had healed himself after he had put the limb back on. Yet no one knew that the limb was not alive but *animated*. It was as dead as Achilios, moving only because of his magic.

It would not have even been possible for him to do *that* if he had not reattached the limb within the first hour of its loss. Any longer, and Mendeln could have done nothing. No, not even that spell, which on the surface had looked like healing, could avail him now.

And he did not want to resurrect Uldyssian as he had Achilios.

His thoughts went to Serenthia, whose skills were nearly as great as Uldyssian’s. She might be able to save his brother.

Where is she? Mendeln suddenly wondered. Surely she, of all people, had sensed what had happened? Why was there not a crowd of edyrem already swarming the pair?

Uldyssian coughed up blood, and then his body jerked even more violently.

The arrow burst into flames, the cinders spilling over Uldyssian’s blood-soaked shirt. From the wound poured out a peculiar, thick liquid, which Mendeln at last recognized as what remained of the arrowhead.

And as the last of it poured out, the wound shrank and shrank... then finally sealed.

Uldyssian coughed again, but this time, it sounded only as if he cleared his throat. His eyes opened.

Mendeln gaped. "Uldyssian! This cannot be! You were—you were —"

"Where—" The elder son of Diomedes tried again. "Where is—is he?"

"Who?"

"Achil—Achilios..."

Only then did the arrow's origins register with Mendeln. Still holding Uldyssian tight, he stared out into the jungle, searching. Of course, he saw nothing, but these days, that meant little.

He suddenly considered the terrible accusation Uldyssian had just made. "Surely not! This was a trick, some ploy of Inarius's or possibly even the Triune. Achilios would never—"

With some effort, Uldyssian stood on his own. Mendeln marveled at his recuperative powers.

"The arrow belonged to Achilios, Mendeln. I know that. It's obvious to me, and it should be obvious to you. He fired it. It was intended to kill me swiftly."

Still hoping to deny that their friend would ever have any part, even involuntarily, in Uldyssian's murder, Mendeln pointed out, "If it had been him, there would be no doubt of your death. From a hundred paces in the thickest woods, Achilios could slay any creature with a shot directly to the heart. This one was close, yes, but—"

"Achilios meant to slay me," his brother insisted. However, Uldyssian's expression softened. "But you're right. He couldn't have missed unless he prayed to."

The conflagration that Uldyssian had started now rose high. That this, too, had not brought the other edyrem running perplexed Mendeln, until he watched his brother douse the fire with a simple wave of his hand. All that remained as memory were some scorched trees.

"It was you, then," he murmured to Uldyssian. "You are the reason no one, not even Serenthia, has come to our aid!"

Uldyssian grimly checked his chest where the arrow had struck. His right hand flared a faint gold as it passed over not only the area but wherever his blood had spilled. Mendeln shook his head in amazement as he watched.

In mere seconds, the stains vanished, and even the rip in his tunic repaired itself.

"In the beginning, I did it to keep anyone from joining us while you summoned the dead. I didn't want anyone else witnessing that, Mendeln. They've already seen enough to fear you."

Mendeln did not entirely believe that Uldyssian's reason was purely the protection of his brother, but he kept silent on it. "And when you

were shot?"

"I assumed it would've vanished...unless that which turned Achilios into an assassin chose not to let it."

"Inarius?"

With a harsh, humorless chuckle, Uldyssian turned back to camp. "You don't believe that any more than I do, do you, Mendeln? Not like him at all. Something as *powerful* as he, maybe..."

His words only served to leave Mendeln cold. "You know that if it is such, we are lost."

But his brother, already walking, casually replied, "One angel, two, or a hundred. I'll bring them all down. All of them."

And as Mendeln stared at his sibling's receding back, he knew that Uldyssian meant it.

* * *

Serenthia stood waiting for them at the perimeter, the former Parthan brigand, Jonas, at her side. As Uldyssian neared them, Saron—a dour Torajian who, with Jonas, acted as Uldyssian's de facto officers—joined the other two.

"Did something happen out there?" Serenthia immediately demanded. "It felt as if—"

"We finished with Mendeln's work, that was all. It took more than we expected."

"And were there answers?" she pressed.

Glancing past the trio, Uldyssian replied, "The Cathedral was behind this. Inarius is placating the people and spreading vile rumors about what we do. He's trying to turn Sanctuary against us."

Jonas frowned. Saron remained dour, his mood having never truly lightened since the death of his cousin at the hands of the Triune. They had been closer than brothers, perhaps even closer than Uldyssian and Mendeln.

"We should march on the great Cathedral itself, master," he stated.

With a nod, Serenthia added, "That's not without merit. Strike at the heart before it gets any worse. We can't do as we did with the Triune, cutting away at it methodically. Inarius isn't permitting us that chance."

Absently rubbing his chest where the arrow had penetrated, Uldyssian considered their view. Mendeln, who had finally joined him, made a noncommittal noise.

"No," Uldyssian finally decided. "Not yet. We've one more place we've got to go before we march on Inarius. Just one more."

"Where's that to be, Master Uldyssian?" asked Jonas.

“The capital...we’re going to the city of Kehjan to see the leaders of the mage clans.”

News of his decision spread fast among the edyrem, and a sense of excitement filled the encampment. Many among Uldyssian’s flock had never been to the capital. Discussions broke out everywhere about what Kehjan the city was like. Those few who had been there did their best to describe it, but from what Uldyssian heard, they all had differing memories.

He let their excitement go unchecked, despite some concern on the part of both Mendeln and Serenthia. They were rightly wary about confronting the mage clans, who had, as far as anyone could tell, avoided interfering in the struggle.

Uldyssian was also wary but at the same time confident. He had it in his mind that the mages, obviously no puppets of the Cathedral of Light, would be interested in a possible alliance. If not that, then certainly they would do their best to lessen the sect’s influence over the masses.

It was worth the gamble to Uldyssian and, since the capital was somewhat on their path toward Inarius’s sanctum, not so troublesome a detour in his mind.

His makeshift army left at first light, pushing through the dense vegetation with little effort. When a river had to be forded, what was easier than using magic to bring together tree trunks to create a bridge or, as some of the more skilled did, simply propel oneself over and land on the other side? When the terrain grew treacherous, how much simpler was it to have small groups of edyrem stand together and literally rip a path through?

At no time did Uldyssian discourage such displays of power among his people. The more confident, the more comfortable they were with their powers, the better chance they would have of surviving in battle, much less winning.

Mendeln, naturally, did not look at all pleased, but he kept his counsel to himself, which satisfied his brother. The edyrem made great progress the first day and the next. They had quite a distance still to go, but Uldyssian calculated that the rate at which they trekked would not give even Inarius’s missionaries much time to raise others further against their cause.

Still, he pushed the edyrem’s pace just a little more...and a little more...and a little more...

Just before dark on the fourth day, they came upon another river. The edyrem began crossing. Uldyssian was at his most cautious and

set several sentries in place.

Yet it seemed that his concern was unwarranted. They were not attacked, and no one was caught by the river. When the last of his followers had made it over, Uldyssian ordered them on, while he stood and surveyed the area of the river with more than just his eyes.

And still there was nothing.

It made no sense to use the last few minutes of dim light to take them farther from such an obvious source of water. With reluctance, Uldyssian called a halt. He set up the usual perimeter and then, recalling the attack, placed additional sentries a bit deeper into the jungle. All of his guards remained in contact with one another.

Even with that done, he still summoned Saron for one more precaution. "I want you to find four others and begin a continuous patrol of the camp itself. Reach out with your minds. You need to be aware of any sensation that seems at all out of the ordinary."

"Yes, Master Uldyssian. I understand completely." The Torajian bowed and immediately went off to locate the ones he needed. Uldyssian vowed to himself to have Jonas and another band take over after a couple of hours. He wanted *all* his sentinels to be fresh of mind.

But as the night lengthened, Uldyssian began to wonder if he had just had a case of nerves. The nearer they got to the capital, the more his task there began to weigh upon him. It was very possible that confronting the mage clans might even get them at least to side temporarily with Inarius. Better the enemy they thought they understood, rather than Uldyssian's unknown and unpredictable powers.

That they would find themselves in a far worse situation if the edyrem were beaten would be something he would have to impress upon them.

But all that had to wait until they reached their destination. Uldyssian finally gave in to his exhaustion, his last thoughts concerning his overzealous precautions. It had only been his nerves—

A bright white light suddenly erupted in his face, blinding him. Uldyssian let out a shout, but his voice was so muted that even he could barely hear it. He reached out with his thoughts to Serenthia and the others—but could not find them.

There existed only the light...only the light and then, gradually, a wondrous figure from whom it was clear the blazing illumination originated. Far taller than any human, he strode confidently toward Uldyssian, his breastplate gleaming and the tendrils of pure force that were his wings flaring a rainbow of fierce colors.

And as he neared the son of Diomedes, he transformed into the leader of the Cathedral of Light, the Prophet.

“Uldyssian ul-Diomed,” came the musical voice. The youth stood just about the former farmer’s height but seemed somehow still to be able to gaze down upon him from well above. His luminous silver-blue eyes penetrated to Uldyssian’s very soul, making the human feel as if he could hide nothing. “My errant child...”

Uldyssian belatedly leapt to his feet. He stared into the Prophet’s beautiful, perfect face—unmarred by scar, wart, or even the slightest beard—which was framed by glistening, golden locks that fell far past his shoulders. “I’m no acolyte of yours, Inarius, and certainly not your child!”

“No...” the beatific figure agreed with a glorious smile full of perfect teeth. “But you are the child of the child of the child several times over who was begat by my even more errant son, he who now calls himself Rathma.”

Uldyssian had been told of a blood link between himself and the angel, but if there was one, it was as far removed from him as if he were related to the animals that he had raised. If Inarius thought to spark some familial bond, then the angel was sorely deluded.

“I do not seek to call family to family,” the Prophet remarked with unsettling accuracy, “but I do come to you with power to grant you absolution even now. You need not continue on this path of sin after sin, my son. I can still forgive you.”

His statements might have been considered mere audacity by Uldyssian if not for the jarring fact that not only was it still impossible to reach out to the others, but even the encampment could not be found. Uldyssian was completely surrounded by the light emanating from his adversary. Even when he took a step back, nothing changed. The ground itself was enshrouded by the celestial illumination.

“You see,” continued Inarius, spreading his hands in a fatherly fashion, “there is no more reason to continue the bloodshed. The outcome is inevitable. Besides, it is not ultimately your fault. You were led astray by *her*, she who shall not be named, and your only mistakes were due to your own inherent deficiencies. You are mortal; you are weak. I mean that not as insult; all humans are weak. It is why they must be led toward the light.”

It was not the words as much as something in the Prophet’s tone, his manner, his very being, that made Uldyssian want to believe. He had felt much the same when confronted by the demon Lucion in his guise as leader of the Triune. Inarius, though, was a thousand times more compelling. Uldyssian had a desire to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness—

For what? he suddenly wondered, his anger burning away his awe at the angelic figure. *I asked for none of this!*

“Fury is a demon’s lover, my good Uldyssian. To give in to it is to abandon thought and heart.”

“Spare me all that! What have you done with them? Where are the others?”

The Prophet nodded approvingly. “Concern...now, there is a goodly aspect. You would do well to be concerned about those who mistakenly follow you down this path, for what you decide may condemn them, too.”

Serry! Mendeln! Jonas! Saron! Uldyssian located no trace of any of them.

He lunged for Inarius, at the same time summoning his power. Yet the Prophet was no longer where Uldyssian expected him. Instead, the angel stood just to the side. He watched dispassionately as the human fell forward.

“Fury leads only to more shame and disaster, Uldyssian ul-Diomed. It leaves you not only lying in the dirt but forever covered over by it.”

Shoving himself up again, Uldyssian glared at the holy figure. He expected flames to rise around the angel and, if they did not harm him, at least wipe the smugness from the unblemished countenance.

But nothing happened.

“You see what chance you have, my good child. There will only be death and damnation for you and those dearest to you, unless you seek forgiveness. Follow the path of sin as you do, and you convict everyone. Is that what you wish? Do you have such conceit?”

Uldyssian spat. “If I’ve conceit, it can’t compare to yours, Inarius. You don’t own us any more than Lucion or Lilith did. This is not your world; it’s ours! Ours!”

The Prophet’s smile vanished. “I forged this world from raw forces taken from the place of Creation! I sculpted the lands and filled the seas. All exists because of me; all remains at my whim...including you, my child.”

Before Uldyssian could respond, voices suddenly rose around him. At first, he took them for Serenthia and some of the edyrem, but then something about them jarred memories long buried...especially one female voice.

My poor Uldyssian! So confused, so angry! Let me comfort you....

He choked back tears. His eyes instinctively sought out the one who spoke.

From the opposite direction, there came a child’s giggle. Uldyssian whirled.

His mother...his little sister...

A shadow passed by the edge of his vision. What little he glimpsed of it was a burly man about his size. There briefly came a second

shape, this one also male, but shorter, younger.

“You sacrificed so much to save them, my child, and though their bodies failed, they gained salvation. They fear for you, however, for you cannot join them if you refuse to accept my light. You will forever be parted—”

Tears spilled down Uldyssian’s face. In his mind, he saw his family as they perished slowly, agonizingly. Although he had rejected the various missionaries and their empty words, Uldyssian still had hoped inside that his mother, his father, and his other siblings had at least found peace in whatever realm existed beyond death.

And that made him wonder at what Inarius revealed to him. With all the angel’s power, why had he not offered to bring Uldyssian’s family back to life? Not a semblance, as Mendeln had done with Achilios, but actually make them alive again?

Was it because he could not? If so, then the angel was not so all-powerful as he pretended.

Which made his summoning these shades—these false shades, very likely—even more abominable to the human. Inarius had dredged up the emotions that Uldyssian had prayed never to feel again. The hollowness, the despair, the bitterness...

Uldyssian roared at the Prophet, using those terrible emotions to intensify his powers. He let his family’s loss overwhelm him and, in doing so, strip away any hesitations he had about unleashing all his might at Inarius.

The blinding light dimmed slightly...but that was all. The sanctimonious face still gazed down upon him. Despite no visible sign that he had done *anything*, Uldyssian felt so drained that all he could do was drop to his knees.

“You have chosen to sin,” the Prophet commented slowly and without emotion. “I cannot help you but by putting an end to your misguided existence, my child.”

With that, Inarius simply vanished.

As he did, the light winked out so abruptly that Uldyssian felt as if he had been plunged into utter darkness. His thoughts were not for himself, though, but for the loved ones he had briefly thought were with him once again.

“Mother...” he rasped. “Father...”

Suddenly, his head jarred up from where it had been resting. Uldyssian discovered that he once again lay in the midst of the encampment, surrounded by sleeping edyrem. A slight breeze coursed through the area, and in the distance, the night creatures of the jungle chattered with one another.

Uldyssian shook. *It can’t have been a dream! It can’t have been...*

His fingers scraped the ground as he pushed himself to a sitting position. Every muscle in his body ached as if he had actually fought against the angel. Yet if that had been the case, surely all would not be so quiet. The encampment should have been in chaos.

It was only a nightmare, Uldyssian insisted. *Only a nightmare... nothing to fear...*

But then he happened to glance at the ground where his hand had lain...and where now dirt lay scorched for more than a yard beyond him.

How convenient, Zorun Tzin thought as he finished his divining. The seven-sided pattern he had scraped in the ground still glowed faintly from residual energies. Letting the crystal he had used for his effort continue to dangle from its gold chain over the center of the pattern, the mage looked ahead into the jungle.

How convenient that he comes to meet me, this Uldyssian ul-Diomed.

Straightening, the Kehjani kicked away the pattern, briefly sending traces of magical residue up along with the flying dirt. He glanced over his shoulders at those with him. In addition to Terul, who wielded both axe and torch, there were half a dozen guards in the loose red garments and golden breastplates of the mage clans' master council. The guards had been foisted upon him by his "employers" and were more likely there to keep watch on the spellcaster rather than assist with his mission. Thus was the way of the council even now. Not enough trust even in the one they had commissioned for this.

Zorun chuckled under his breath. They were right to be so wary.

The underbrush ahead suddenly shifted as if something large approached. The mage thrust the crystal into a pouch on his belt, then readied an incantation. Terul let out a grunt and moved forward to protect his master. The guards readied their weapons but remained where they were.

A figure burst from the darkness into the area, a man perhaps near the end of the third decade of his life. He looked to have once been strong and lithe and radiated a presence that indicated a high caste. However, black spots—almost burns—covered whatever could be seen of his flesh, including his face, and he looked as if he had taken neither food nor drink in days. There were still hints of a handsome face, and the eyes were penetrating, but in a manner that Zorun thought bordered on madness.

Madness...or some sort of plague.

"Stand where you are," he commanded. One hand began gesturing.

“You will come no closer.”

The eyes stared past the mage. A sickly grin spread over the stranger’s countenance. Only then did Zorun and the rest see that his gums had turned black and his teeth were crumbling.

“You’ll...do better...” he rasped.

Zorun started to chant, and the figure fell over.

Some of the guards started forward, but the spellcaster waved them back. It was not out of any concern for them but for himself. If there was any plague involved, he did not want any of those with him carrying it.

There was a quick and safe way to discover the truth. Reaching into another pouch, Zorun removed a small box he had kept with him since the last plague that had touched the capital. He took from it a powder that had once been bone ground from a victim of such disease. The body had first been safely burned to remove contamination, but the bone would still remember the disease. If there was anything similar to it on this body, the powder would fly from his palm and cover the stranger.

Muttering the spell, the mage poured just enough powder into his hand. The yellowed dust trembled as if ready to fly...and then stilled.

There was no plague. Zorun was about to dismiss the body as unimportant, when the rags it was clad in finally caught his eye.

“Terul! Bring the torch closer to him!”

The brutish servant obeyed. Zorun let Terul stand closer than him, just in case.

They were indeed the robes of an acolyte of the Triune and, from what the mage could glean, of a priest of some importance.

Deciding that it was safe to risk it, Zorun ordered, “Turn him over.”

Setting down his axe, the servant used one huge hand to shove the dead man by the shoulder.

The priest suddenly gripped Terul by the wrist. The eyes opened—

With an uncharacteristic sound of dismay, Terul tugged his hand free. Both master and servant watched as the priest grew still again.

When the body remained unmoving, Zorun indicated that Terul should finish his task. Despite his earlier exclamation, the giant now did not hesitate. He shoved the priest onto his back.

Seen more clearly up close, the robes looked to be those of a follower of Dialon. Zorun had made a thorough study of the Triune—one had to know one’s enemies—and noted markings still remaining that indicated that this man had once served in the prime temple itself.

“A pity you are dead,” he murmured to the body. “What could you tell us about this Ascenian, I wonder?”

There was a chain around the neck, one that had not been visible before. Using a stick to lift it loose, Zorun saw that it held a medallion of office.

“I should know your name, it appears...let me see.” The Kehjani had, through his varied sources, identified the senior priests of the sect and kept track of the changes and politics. He had been most intrigued by the High Priest of Mefis, one Malic, until word had reached him of that one’s disappearance and supposed death. Zorun was no fool; there had been more to the Triune than it preached, a dark side that he had felt Malic best represented.

But this sorry fool was not Malic. Zorun ran through his remarkable memory and finally hit upon the name he sought.

“Your name was...was Durram. Yes, that was it. Durram.” Next to him, Terul let out a grunt. Ignoring the sound, Zorun rose. “Yes, you would have been a fount of information to me...if you’d managed to live a bit longer, that is.”

The mage used a sandaled foot to push the corpse among the thick vegetation. The priest’s presence still interested him, in that Durram was far from where the main temple had been located and very enticingly near the current location of Uldyssian ul-Diomed. Zorun expected that given time, even Terul could fathom that there certainly had to be a connection. Durram appeared, against all sanity, to have been tracking the Ascenian on foot, despite an obviously debilitating condition.

“Admirable, if foolish,” the mage declared to himself. “Better to have done something for his life first. Come, Terul! We are done here.”

The giant, who had still been staring at the body, belatedly obeyed. He picked up his axe with one hand, hefting it over his shoulder. They and the guards mounted up, then headed farther into the jungle.

But not before Terul glanced back one last time at the body of the unfortunate Durram.

Glanced back...and ever so briefly smiled.

Four

It was a more somber Uldyssian who drove the edyrem hard that next day. He did not explain to anyone the reason for his change in emotion, and no one dared ask, not even Mendeln. That his brother likely suspected something dread, Uldyssian did not care. More than ever, what was important was to reach the capital and face the mage clans.

But now he wondered if even they were enough to aid in all arrayed against him. In Uldyssian's mind, Inarius had proven quite readily how little the human was compared with him. The angel made even Lilith's power seem inconsequential. Yet Uldyssian had no choice but to face his celestial foe eventually, face him and probably die quickly and shamefully.

The edyrem themselves that day faced nothing worse than a little rain. It was welcome at first, for it cooled the jungle some, but the moment the rain ceased, the humidity leapt. The Parthans were hard kept to maintain a reasonable pace after that, and even those from the jungle regions faltered sooner than he would have desired.

Yet when they made camp, they did so with the knowledge at last that the next day would enable them to see—at least from the treetops—the distant but distinct spires of Kehjan the city. That even gave Uldyssian something with which to cheer his thoughts a little.

He set down to sleep with the certainty that there would be a repeat of the previous night's horror, but only vague dreams haunted him. Uldyssian awoke in much better spirits, human nature enabling him to make less of the encounter with Inarius as time and distance grew. Still, he was determined to make his offer to the mages and other leaders as soon as they reached the city.

Near late morning, their trek was interrupted by a sight welcome to many of the edyrem. A much-traveled road divided the jungle, a road quickly verified by Saron and some of the others as leading directly to the main gates of Kehjan.

Uldyssian saw no reason he and his followers should not continue along the road. The edyrem fell into columns, he, Serenthia, and Mendeln at the head.

"Now we look like an invading army," the younger brother said with some distaste.

"We were given no choice."

“No, but I wish we had been.”

Uldyssian shrugged, then squinted as someone came from the opposite direction. A small caravan. There were three wagons with rounded wooden roofs. Upon each were emblems on the side that Saron quickly identified.

“The merchant Fahin, Master Uldyssian. Some of his wagons, at least. He is one of the richest merchants in all the lowlands.”

“I know that name,” interjected Serenthia. “His people did business with my father. I even met Fahin once, when I was younger.”

In addition to the wagons, a full score of mounted guards accompanied the merchant’s wares. The evident captain caught sight of the immense throng marching toward his charge and quickly signaled the fighters to ride to the forefront. The wagons, meanwhile, began to try to turn about.

“He must be rich, indeed,” commented Mendeln. “To find so many men willing to sacrifice themselves for his goods.”

The riders did not charge but spread across the road. The wall they created was obvious; to reach the wagons would demand much death from those they likely considered brigands.

“Turn away!” the captain, a sharp-nosed young man with a scar across his chin, shouted. “Turn away, or face our blades!”

“We’re no thieves,” returned Uldyssian, opening his hands in a gesture of friendship.

“That we know, Ascenian! Your crimes in Toraja and other places are well established. Our master is not yours to take, even if we die to make that so!”

“Fahin is in the wagons?” Serenthia put a hand on Uldyssian’s arm. “If I could speak with him, we might have an ally before we reach the gates. It worked in Partha....”

Her suggestion had merit, but to speak with the merchant, they first had to deal with the zealous captain and his men. Meeting the officer’s condemning gaze, Uldyssian quietly said, “We want no bloodshed.”

As he spoke, he spread his hands at each side. Among the mounted fighters, especially those in the center, horses began to stagger toward the outer edges of the road. The sight looked like some sort of macabre dance. Several of the guards let out curses and shouts as they attempted in vain to veer their mounts back into position.

The captain was the first among them to understand just what Uldyssian did. At the top of his lungs, he cried, “Attack! Attack that one!”

But although he and those nearest urged their steeds forward, the animals simply continued to stagger sideways. Despite the frustrated officer’s best attempts, a large gap opened up in the road.

“Mendeln, you and the others wait here. Serenthia, let’s go meet this Master Fahin.”

The two strode past the guards, who could do nothing to reach them. The invisible barriers Uldyssian had created kept the mounted warriors trapped on opposing sides of the road.

The lead wagon had all but turned about, but the other two were still in progress. As he reached the first, with a gesture, he forced the driver to look his way.

“Which is Master Fahin’s wagon?”

“The—the middle!”

Giving him a nod of thanks, Uldyssian led Serenthia to the wagon in question.

A guard next to the driver of the second vehicle tried to throw a spear at the pair but discovered too late that it now temporarily adhered to his hand. He fell over the driver. Both men might have tumbled to the ground, but Uldyssian kept them safe. It would be impossible to enlist the merchant’s help if any of his people were injured or slain.

They came around to the back of the wagon, where a single door stood. It flew open at Uldyssian’s desire.

A shouting guard dove toward the pair.

He managed no more than a foot out of the wagon before flying backward into it again. Uldyssian sent him to the opposite wall. The guard landed softly but found himself pinned.

From the left side of the interior, a heavysset figure wearing a jeweled nose ring leaned into view. His hair had once been rich black but now had gray streaks. He was lighter of skin than Saron yet still darker than either of the two before him.

“You have me,” he proclaimed with dignity. Despite his girth and his extravagant clothing—there was enough actual gold decor on him to feed Uldyssian’s village for a year—Fahin did not strike the son of Diomedes as so self-indulgent as to be oblivious to the needs of others. However, that still did not mean that he would see the truth. His next words, though, gave some hint of hope. “Bring no more harm to those who serve me. Let them go, and I am yours.”

“No one has been harmed,” Uldyssian returned. “I am Uldyssian ul-Diomed, and by my honor I swear to their safety. We came to speak, nothing more.”

As the merchant’s brow rose in obvious disbelief, Serenthia stepped forward. Leaning into the wagon, she said, “Master Fahin, do you remember my father, Cyrus of Seram? He dealt with you much in the past.”

“Seram...Seram...I know the village, and the name Cyrus, too.” The

Kehjani closed his eyes in thought. "A virtuous man, I recall that. He had many children, a blessing, I hope." Opening his eyes, Fahin nodded. "Yes, I know Cyrus of Seram...and you are his daughter?"

"We met when I was young, Master Fahin." Serenthia hesitated. "I remember—I remember you had the most beautiful white pony with you. She had a silky, thick mane, and the only part not white on her entire body was a little streak just above her one eye that made it look like she was thinking something—"

"Sherah," Fahin murmured, a childlike grin spreading across his face. "Ah! I'd not thought of the little one for years!" He clapped his hands in cheerful memory of the pony. "And though you could have learned of her from someone else, I think, there is that which makes me believe you are who you say you are." Some of the pleasure left him. "But what that means now, I do not know. I have heard stories of an Ascenian leading an army of terror across the lands—"

"No one has anything to fear from us," Uldyssian interjected as he gently moved Serenthia aside. "No one unless they serve the evil that is the Triune or the Cathedral."

"Indeed? I could almost believe what you speak concerning the Triune, for rumors of secret rituals recently have reached the highest levels in the capital, but nothing but good is said about the Prophet, who even preaches peace with you despite Toraja and elsewhere."

"Preaches it while he twists the minds of others into trying to slay us. I can't prove what I say to you, Master Fahin, but I hope that you will give me the chance to plead my case...for the sake of all of us."

The stout merchant indicated his surroundings. "You see that you have a captive audience. I can do *nothing* but listen."

Uldyssian frowned. "That isn't what I want of you." An idea that he had not discussed with anyone else seemed his best hope now. "Hear me, Master Fahin. Would you listen if I stood alone before you and the leaders of Kehjan? Would they accept such an arrangement? I'll freely walk into Kehjan alone—" He cut off Serenthia, who started to protest. "And place myself under your guidance throughout it. Myself alone. Will they—will you—give me the chance to tell them the truth?"

The merchant leaned back. Uldyssian saw no subterfuge in the man's eyes, although he reminded himself that this man made his living dealing.

"Your—people—they would have to stay two days beyond the gates," Fahin declared. "Any closer with so many, the city would expect imminent attack." He pointed at Cyrus's daughter. "She could come with you, if you wish. That would be acceptable."

"It'll only be me."

“I won’t let you go into the capital alone!” Serenthia blurted. “I’ll go—”

He shook his head. “You need to keep the rest under control, Serry. None of the others can manage that. They certainly won’t be comfortable around Mendeln.”

“Then take him with you! You know that he’d gladly come!”

Uldyssian had already considered that. “The mages might find him far too unsettling. I won’t risk him or anyone else. I’ll be fine.” Uldyssian eyed the merchant. “If Master Fahin says I’ll be.”

“If I take you into Kehjan, so it will be, Uldyssian.” Fahin rose, moving very smoothly for one of his bulk. “Permit me to tell those with me that we will be returning home. Captain Aztuhl will need some placating, too.”

A grateful Uldyssian bowed low. “Thank you. I apologize for disrupting your journey.”

“The trip I was undertaking was for personal matters, not much business. Do you think me so destitute that I have but three wagons? I might have been more upset if I had been forced to have twenty or more turn around, not these few.” Fahin waved off his assistance as he disembarked. Once down, the merchant glanced back inside. “Oh! My poor bodyguard?”

Uldyssian released his hold on the man. With a gasp, the guard slumped into a sitting position. He stared at Uldyssian as if the latter had two heads. That was likely to be one of the predominant expressions among the Kehjani, the son of Diomedes thought...that and, thanks to Inarius, hatred.

Captain Aztuhl proved to be an obstinate man, but in the end, he bowed to his employer’s dictates. On the other side, Uldyssian faced many protests from his own followers. No one liked the notion of him entering the capital alone, but, like the merchant, he brooked no disagreement.

It was decided that Fahin would lead the way back to Kehjan, with Uldyssian riding beside his wagon. For the journey back, the merchant chose to sit next to his driver. He did not wish to appear afraid before his people, which Uldyssian could appreciate. However, Captain Aztuhl also remained near, ever ready should the Ascenian do anything he considered bordering on threat.

It was Master Fahin who indicated at last when they were approximately two days from their destination. Saron and others reluctantly verified this, not that Uldyssian had asked. In the short time that he had come to know the merchant, he had gained much respect for the man. Good fortune had finally smiled upon the son of Diomedes; with Fahin to introduce him to the ruling powers, there

was hope that they might listen, not merely react.

“The fractious nature of the mage clans’ council means that there is merit in meeting with Prince Ehmadi. The young prince has sought to strengthen his position. He has gained backing from many of the guilds, and even the mages will pay attention to what he says,” Fahin had explained early on.

“What about this feuding between the clans? How deadly has it been?”

“There was a time, my son, when not a day could pass without a body found in some terrible state. There are many deaths to this day whose cause no one outside the clans can decipher, so monstrous were the remains. That has lessened, but only in the sense of the survivors of a wild pack of hyenas still fighting over a morsel. They size one another up, awaiting their chance to take advantage of weaknesses, and at that point, there will be more blood.”

Uldyssian had wondered if the spellcasters would be any use at all, so consumed with fighting among themselves. “Is there any hope in speaking with them, then?”

“If that is necessary for your desires, then yes. The council, even while its individual members seek to stab one another in the back, yet strives to make certain that nothing threatens what they have set up. They must abide the prince, for his lineage goes back far beyond their rule, but a danger to the magic they so worship, that would bring even the worst of rivals together for a time.”

“But they allowed the Cathedral and the Triune to rise up and weaken their influence.”

Fahin had conceded this point but then added, “Both arose with such swiftness that even I question how. The mages were caught unaware, and by the time they understood what was happening, there was nothing they could do.” At that point, the merchant had leaned over from the wagon and nearly poked Uldyssian in the chest. “They have not made such a mistake for you.”

“I’ve seen nothing of them.”

“And that is what they wish. Be wary even as you offer them either truce or alliance, Uldyssian. Your back will always be open to them.”

As much as he appreciated most of Master Fahin’s advice, in this Uldyssian thought that the merchant underestimated him. After fighting demons and high priests, the mages were a danger he constantly considered and, thus, was prepared for. Only Inarius truly disturbed him.

Before he separated from them, Uldyssian gave the edyrem a final speech he felt necessary to calm their worries. He also did it for the sake of the locals, for his followers now camped not that far from two

small villages, and the path ahead was even more populated. They had met other wagons and travelers in the final day before reaching this point, some of whom had nervously passed by, while a few had fled back toward the city. Fahin had spoken cheerfully to all that he could, doing his best to reassure those who knew him that this was not some army...even if it was.

Mendeln bade him well after all else had stepped back, Uldyssian's brother whispering, "You know that not even Serenthia will be able to hold these people if they sense anything has gone awry. They will and *have* died for you. I would do no less, too."

"Have you spoken with Rathma? Has that one said anything in regard to this?"

Mendeln frowned. "I've not spoken with him since last we talked of it...and that makes me more anxious for you. Rathma would not be silent and absent without good reason."

Not having as much faith as his brother did in the Ancient, Uldyssian muttered, "I can't just do nothing because he's failed to show up. We have to move on constantly, Mendeln. This is our conflict now; his day is long past."

Mendeln only nodded, then clasped his elder sibling briefly on the shoulder.

Uldyssian and Fahin's caravan were soon far from the edyrem. By himself, Uldyssian seemed less of interest to those they encountered along the way than in previous circumstances. The reason for that became evident when two wagons heading away from the capital proved to be under the control of a merchant from none other than Tulisam, a larger town not all that far from his own beloved Seram. Uldyssian did not identify himself, for some of the comments the wagon master—a beefy, bald man named Larius—made in passing had to do with the still-at-large murderer who had slain a pair of priests. Still, despite that moment, it was otherwise welcome to hear and see someone of a background similar to his own.

"There will be more such as you in the city," Fahin reminded him. "Kehjan is not like most of the other places you have been in the lowlands. All people, even those who have sailed from the other side of the sea, come eventually to the capital. It is possible that there even might be one who knows you..."

That briefly distracted Uldyssian, who imagined one of Serenthia's brothers perhaps spotting him. Unlike her, they might not be so forgiving when it came to their father's death. Uldyssian himself still mourned the man and wished that somehow circumstance—and Lilith—had not brought about that terrible day.

They passed not one but two armed patrols, both of which Master

Fahin immediately summoned to him. Fahin explained the edyrem as pilgrims, with Uldyssian their head, and with his influence managed, at least for the moment, to keep the captains from riding out to investigate the throngs.

“Once we speak with Prince Ehmada,” the merchant said after the first, “I am sure that he will send out those who will keep order and prevent any misunderstanding.”

Fahin preferred his own wagon to local inns, his explanation having to do with not wishing to share with past sleepers whatever they had left in their beds. His decision suited Uldyssian, who distrusted the inns for other reasons, just fine.

Having committed himself to this endeavor, the merchant embraced it utterly. He had kept abreast of matters throughout Uldyssian’s struggle against the Triune, for Fahin had business in every major settlement and several smaller ones besides.

“I will not lie to you that this matter with the temple did not affect me,” he revealed to Uldyssian. “And that is why I also seek this talk between you and the city. I would have peace and prosperity, as any good man would want.”

“And as any good merchant would, too?”

Fahin’s eyes twinkled. “Just so.”

It was a warm, windless night. His host offered his own wagon to Uldyssian, but, not liking to be boxed in, the latter politely refused. Instead, he chose an area near the horses, relying not just on his own powers but on their acute senses to warn him of any approach. Fahin looked a little askance at such a location, but Uldyssian, who had grown up with animals, found their nearness and scents comforting and familiar.

Sleep did not come quickly despite that, for Uldyssian found that he felt odd with Mendeln, Serenthia, and the other edyrem physically so far away. The only times he had been separated from them had been when someone or another, such as Lilith, had dragged him off. Distance also made the link between him and the rest more tenuous, but that could not be helped.

Captain Aztuhl came by, the officer eyeing him with continued distrust. “It would be best if you remained nearer to the wagons, Ascenian.”

“I’m well enough here.”

“As you will, then.” The captain gave him one last glare, then strode off.

Uldyssian paid the man’s lack of manners no mind. He expected to see a lot more of it in the capital, but it would be nothing he could not handle.

Still sleep would not come. Uldyssian impatiently began studying the trees above, hoping somehow that would lull him. Many had vines and others long, snakelike branches. He already knew that there were no predators hiding in the foliage, and even had there been any, Uldyssian would have not been overly concerned.

The trees all but created a canopy over this part of the road. Some of the branches hung so low that they nearly grazed the tops of the wagons.

He gradually began to calm. The rest of Master Fahin's party had settled down, only the sentries on duty moving about. There were two low fires for safety. The branches above the wagons rustled. Uldyssian at last shut his eyes—

Then he wondered why the branches would move when there was no wind.

Uldyssian leapt up. "Captain—"

The branches from every nearby tree came rushing down, seizing wagons, horses, and men. One guard screamed as he was tossed into the dark jungle. The branches dropped a horse on a wagon not yet plucked up, crushing in the roof.

Captain Aztuhl chopped his way free of the groping branches, then seized a log from one of the fires. He fended off his first few attackers, but more and more thrust toward him.

Glaring at the trees that were the source of the captain's predicament, Uldyssian used his powers to rip the branches off. The trees to which they had been attached shuddered, then stilled. A rain of broken limbs fell upon Aztuhl, but they were only an annoyance.

Uldyssian looked up at the nearest wagon, which he knew was Fahin's. The son of Diomedes clenched a fist at the branches there, then drew the fist down.

The trees shook with obvious effort as they fought his control. Whatever had unleashed this chaos on the party wielded tremendous magic. Still, for some reason, Uldyssian did not think it the work of Inarius. It was not his manner. Despite the skill involved, there was a certain clumsiness.

But clumsy or not, the attack had already proven a deadly one. Someone had clearly been watching and waiting, and somehow they had managed to avoid detection by him.

Fahin's wagon finally came to rest again. Uldyssian frowned, and as he did, the branches began peeling away from the wagon. They blackened as if burned, then shriveled until there was nothing left but stubs.

Yet even with so many limbs destroyed by him, there were still far too many. Uldyssian heard another guard scream. Of the last of the

three wagons, there was no sign. Horses not seized ran in panic.

“Beware!” Captain Aztuhl leapt out of nowhere, colliding with a distracted Uldyssian.

The missing wagon came crashing down a short distance from the duo. As he struggled free of the captain, Uldyssian estimated that the wagon would have missed him even if Aztuhl had not come to his rescue. Still, he was grateful for the man’s concern. It *had* been a close thing.

“You must help me get my father out of the wagon!” Aztuhl gasped. “Please!”

“Your father?” The only wagon left was Master Fahin’s. “Do you mean—”

“I was not born of his wife,” the captain hastily explained. “But he took me into his house after her death and acknowledged me as his.”

He needed to say no more. Uldyssian and Aztuhl headed toward the wagon, where someone was already attempting to kick open the damaged door. As the door went flying open, the rotund form of the merchant emerged.

“Father!” called the captain. “Look out—”

Aztuhl’s warning cut off with a gagging sound. Uldyssian quickly turned, but the captain, clutching at the vines around his throat, was already vanishing into the foliage.

“Aztuhl!” Fahin shouted mournfully.

But there was nothing even Uldyssian could do. He reached out toward where he had last seen the man, but although scores of branches descended at his will, none of them held Aztuhl.

Uldyssian seized the merchant. “There’s nothing that can be done for him! I’m sorry!”

“It is—it is—” The teary-eyed merchant could say no more.

As he tried to maneuver Fahin away from the attacking trees, it finally occurred to Uldyssian that his focus had been all wrong. He had been reacting to the spell when he should have been seeking out its caster. There had been so much distraction that Uldyssian had not had the opportunity to think beyond the moment, but that would change now.

With Fahin in tow, Uldyssian did a sweeping search of the vicinity with his mind. At first glance, there was nothing, but he had become accustomed to the tricks used by his foes to mask themselves from notice. Uldyssian began seeking those areas where the absence of his unseen enemy was *too* great.

There! The area in question was so utterly calm that it could only be where the spellcaster hid. Uldyssian focused his will on the spot, seeking to rip away the other’s protection and then strike him down.

“Uldyssian! There is—”

Something heavy struck the son of Diomedes on the back of the head. Uldyssian’s thoughts swam. He stumbled past Fahin, unable to believe that an attack as simple as someone sneaking up behind him had succeeded.

“You foul wretch!” The watery image of the merchant drawing from his belt a jeweled but quite serviceable dagger passed before Uldyssian’s eyes. Fearful for his friend, he made a feeble grab for Fahin but easily missed. Fahin vanished behind him.

Uldyssian tried to turn in that direction, but his reflexes were oddly slow. He had not merely been hit, he realized; some spell also overtook him.

In desperation, he tried to burn away whatever had control of him. His head cleared a little. Uldyssian heard struggling.

Master Fahin let out a howl. There was a chuckle; then a heavy body dropped next to Uldyssian.

Powerful hands grabbed the son of Diomedes by the collar. Uldyssian squinted, trying to strike, but something pressed against his chest, making it impossible to concentrate. His body felt numb all over.

A grotesque visage all but pressed into his own face. The head was much too small for the body, but there was that in the eyes that spoke to Uldyssian of an intelligence equal to, if not greater than, his own.

“A step closer,” grunted the behemoth with an evil grin. The words were almost mangled by his huge mouth. “A step closer...”

He thrust a palm against Uldyssian’s forehead.

Five

Zorun Tzin grinned with almost childlike pleasure at his success. He had hoped to use this particular spell—one carefully plotted out over a period of months for another purpose—to cause enough commotion to distract the Ascenian, but never in his wildest dreams had the mage expected such success. Truly, his power was greater than even he had ever assumed.

The deaths did not in the least bother Zorun. He knew exactly who had been in the wagons and that there would be some repercussions, but no one would trace the killing of Master Fahin to him. They were more likely to set the blame at the feet of Uldyssian ul-Diomed, something that Zorun would encourage. The rumors of the Ascenian's might and violent nature were, after all, widely known.

It would also make the mage's capturing of the renegade all that more impressive...if he bothered even to tell the council. Thoughts had been circulating in his head, thoughts involving the gaining of much, much power.

Power enough so that all other mages would bow to him.

As far as Zorun could sense, no witnesses had survived. All proceeded as planned. He had kept a furtive, and necessarily distant eye on Uldyssian for several days, and the encounter with the merchant had proven just what the bearded spellcaster desired. The Ascenian had willingly separated himself from his herd and set things in motion just exactly as Zorun required them.

Just to be on the safe side, though, the mage ordered the guards, "Go out and make certain that there are no survivors. Quickly, now."

They obeyed with some reluctance, clearly not comfortable with all he had done. Zorun watched them hurry out toward the ruined wagons. Again unbidden came the thoughts of what he could do with the power the Ascenian supposedly wielded. Of course, that made the guards a situation he would have to rectify.

The underbrush to his left shook as a hulking form dragged its burden toward him. Zorun had no difficulty recognizing Terul's too-small head.

"Ah! You have him! Splendid, Terul!"

The servant grunted, then brought the body closer. Daring at last to summon light, Zorun studied the Ascenian up close. "Not much to look at. A farmer, as they said. Hmmp! Still, more valuable than

gold, eh, Terul?"

But the giant was gazing past his master. A deep frown spread over Terul's ugly countenance, and his thick brow wrinkled in apparent thought.

"Maybe not good, they come back," he suddenly declared in one of the most complete sentences that Zorun had ever heard him speak.

Terul's blunt comment reinforced the mage's own earlier concerns. He eyed the distant forms of the guards as they searched among the wreckage for any life. The mage came to a decision. "Yes. I wonder if I can continue the spell...."

He bent down to the pattern he had earlier drawn in the soft ground. Part of it had been marred by his foot, but Zorun easily remedied that. He had drained himself with his earlier effort, yet somehow he felt that he still had enough for one last task.

Raising his staff over the pattern, Zorun Tzin gestured. He had designed this spell to be one where chanting was not necessary, for any noise might attract the attention of the target, or, in this case, targets.

The runes along his staff glowed slightly. A moment later, illumination began to emanate from those in the pattern as well.

From the vicinity of the wagons came the rustling of leaves and branches. The shadowed figures of the guards gave no indication that they noticed anything amiss.

Zorun whispered a single word. "Jata."

As they had done before, the trees that still had branches and vines bent down. They reached with deadly accuracy for the six soldiers.

The first had no chance to scream. The vines wrapped around his mouth and throat and branches bore him into the foliage. A comrade nearby turned—

Branches seized him. He managed a cry for help, which warned the others. One guard made a leap for him, but the second man was already rising above the ground.

Their leader pointed in Zorun's direction. The four remaining fighters started toward him, their intentions obvious. However, two managed only a step before they were taken, and another barely more than that. They chopped at the insidious vegetation, but even with their sharp weapons, they could not make enough headway.

The officer was the last to disappear. He swore an oath at Zorun that colored even the mage's ears. Then the vines that encircled his neck tightened so much that he choked to death.

The trees dragged the remains above and out of sight. They would be deposited some distance from the area, where animals would remove any trace of them. Naturally, Zorun would also blame their

deaths and disappearances on Uldyssian. As with the others, the Ascenian would be unavailable to protest his innocence.

Satisfied, the mage lowered his staff and kicked dirt over the pattern. He suddenly weaved uncertainly, his exertions too much even for him.

Fortunately, Terul was there to catch him. With the giant's assistance, Zorun mounted his horse. The servant then retrieved the still body of Uldyssian ul-Diomed.

Taking a sip of wine from a sack, Zorun Tzin nodded. The night's work had indeed gone well. He had bagged his quarry much more easily than even he had imagined. The mage swore not to be so humble about his own greatness in the future.

Zorun also finally swore not to tell the mage council that he had succeeded. He would just explain to them that Uldyssian had been waiting for him, that the Ascenian had, in his madness, slaughtered both those in the merchant's caravan and the council's noble guards. It would mean looking like a failure in the council's eyes—something that they would enjoy—but Zorun would know the truth, and that was all that mattered. After all, why should he turn over such a prize to them, who would only squabble over it? Better that Uldyssian ul-Diomed would be in the hands of one who best knew how to make use of his supposed gifts.

Zorun steered his mount around. "Come, Terul," he commanded, leaving to the servant, who had also mounted up, the task of guiding both his horse and the one bearing the Ascenian back to the city. There would be no difficulty entering Kehjan unnoticed, not even by the council. He was Zorun Tzin, after all.

"The soldiers' horses," rumbled Terul abruptly.

"Hmm?" The mage once again had to marvel at his servant's awareness. Yes, surprisingly, Terul was correct again; something had to be done with the extra horses. The council might wonder how all six animals had survived unscathed when their riders had not.

Of course, that was a situation more easily remedied than all previous. Zorun reached into a pouch and removed a small tube. He placed one end to his lips and blew.

The horse before him jerked, then collapsed in a heap. Two others fell just as easily. By the time anyone came across them, the potion in their bodies would have rotted away a good part of their carcasses. They would look as if Uldyssian ul-Diomed had cruelly slaughtered them along with the rest. Such a touch would only strengthen Zorun's story, which he was already formulating for the fools on the council.

"That should do very well, eh, Terul? The mage council will appreciate that I salvaged what little I could, don't you think?"

Terul grunted agreement.

Weary but feeling quite pleased with himself, Zorun Tzin rode on. Behind him, Terul tugged on the reins of Uldyssian's horse and, with a last grin at the unmoving figure, followed the mage.

In a place that was not a place, what seemed glittering stars swirled over an immense, black emptiness. Had there been someone to see those stars, he would have noticed in each a gleaming, mirrorlike scale.

And in each of those glittering scales, he would have seen a moment of his life. From the very beginning on into adulthood...and perhaps even the very end. Indeed, the lives of all who had ever been born on Sanctuary could be found among these scales.

The scales of what some might call—if they saw them arranged just so—a dragon but which was so much more than that.

His name was Trag'Oul, and he had existed since this world had been molded by the refugee angels and demons. The essence of creation that they had stolen to forge Sanctuary had included what was him. He had grown as the world had grown, and his fate was tied to Sanctuary as much as was that of the humans now populating it.

Because of that and because he knew the threat to Sanctuary of both the High Heavens and the Burning Hells, he had, with some hesitation, taken on a pupil, the very son of Inarius. He had called him Rathma after the Ancient had rejected his birth name, Linarian. Trag'Oul had found him quite the willing student and had imparted to him wisdom even the angels and demons lacked. And all the while Rathma learned, the two had, over the centuries, strived to keep Sanctuary from completely tipping to one side or the other of what Trag'Oul called the Balance. The Balance represented the equilibrium of the world. A descent into utter evil meant terrible destruction; a turn to the complete absence of evil meant stagnation and decay. The middle, where good and evil coexisted but neither had the great advantage, was, in their minds, the best and only choice.

But most of all, maintaining that Balance meant keeping the High Heavens from discovering the existence of the world, as the Burning Hells already had. The demons were kept in check not only by Inarius's efforts but by the dragon's as well. If the angels entered the fray, though...

Rathma, I would speak with you, Trag'Oul said to the darkness.

The cloaked figure suddenly stood below the shifting stars. "I am here."

We must prepare for the unthinkable.

“Must we? I am not so certain just yet.”

For one of the rare times in his existence, the dragon was caught off-guard. *And why do you think such a thing?*

Rathma's cloak fluttered around him as if it were an extension of his thoughts. “If the High Heavens know about Sanctuary, why have they not swooped in en masse? There seems no point in delaying that.”

They are studying Inarius and the Burning Hells, evaluating their positions.

“Sensible...but not if you include the hunter, Achilios, in the situation. He tried to slay Uldyssian, you know.”

Which makes it more likely that it is your father who controls him. I fail to see your point. The stars reshaped themselves, becoming again a constellation resembling the long, serpentine creature of myth.

“It was not my father. I know that now with all certainty. I know where he is and what he has been doing. It was not he.”

Then we are back to the belief that the High Heavens is aware of Sanctuary.

Rathma's brow rose. “Or but one of its august host.”

But one? The stars realigned themselves as Trag'Oul digested this. But one? Who, though, would come in secret, rather than immediately reveal Inarius's betrayal to the Angiris Council? There is none.

“There is one. There is he who was closest to my father, as close as blood, despite neither having any. Yea, I might call him uncle, Trag, for as the angels count them, he and Inarius are considered brothers.”

You cannot mean Tyrael.

There was a moment of silence, as if both expected that speaking this angel's name would cause him to appear. After a time, though, Rathma finally spoke, in a voice that, for humans, at least, could have barely been heard.

“Yes. Tyrael. I believe that the Angel of Justice has come on his own to judge his brother's crimes...and, in the process, Sanctuary.”

Uldyssian awoke. At least, that was the best he could describe his change in condition. In truth, he felt somewhere midway between that and unconsciousness. His head swam in a manner that disconcerted him, making it impossible to focus.

But despite that disorientation, Uldyssian felt certain of one thing.

Inarius surely had him.

He could imagine no one else who could so easily trap him...and that made the figure who stepped before him all the more odd. He was dark of skin, with a long beard well kept. His eyes, though, were

what garnered the most attention, for they pierced the fog of Uldyssian's mind as nothing else was able to do.

"You hear me, Uldyssian ul-Diomed? You hear me? I've kept you unconscious for the entire trip back, so you should be coherent enough now to respond."

Uldyssian tried to answer, but his tongue felt too huge, and his jaw seemed not to work. He managed a nod, which satisfied the robed figure.

"Good! Understand, then, that I am your captor. I, the great Zorun Tzin!"

He said this as if Uldyssian should know him and appeared slightly put off by the prisoner's lack of recognition. Zorun Tzin sniffed disdainfully, then went on. "They all feared you, but you proved quite simple to take, truly. I sometimes still wonder if it was even worth all I did, all I betrayed..."

Once again, Uldyssian tried to speak, with the same results.

"You shall be talking soon enough, rest assured, my friend! There is much I would learn about you before I decide just what should be done."

A huge figure lumbered past behind the spellcaster's back. For some reason, the brutish form seized Uldyssian's attention more than his captor.

Zorun glanced back. "Terul! Bring me that small black chest on the third shelf. Now!"

Zorun's servant stalked off to obey, but not before meeting Uldyssian's gaze. The captive felt the urge to say something but knew the futility.

"Does Terul upset you with his appearance?" the mage asked, misreading Uldyssian's reaction. "There are far worse things in the world. He's the least of your concerns, Ascenian...and I am your greatest."

He raised a staff that Uldyssian only now saw and muttered something. Various runes of the staff flared.

A scream echoed in Uldyssian's ears, but it took him a moment to realize that it was his own. Pain suddenly ravaged his body, as if every inch of his skin were slowly peeled away.

"It is only sensation now," explained the robed figure, "but soon it will be reality. I give you this demonstration to encourage you to be forthcoming with whatever answers I desire. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes!" That he could speak now in no manner pleased Uldyssian. All that mattered was the pain. His head still swam, enabling him to pay attention only to Zorun Tzin, nothing else. He still did not even know his surroundings, other than the bit of stone floor beneath the

spellcaster's sandaled feet.

With a sweeping gesture of the staff, Zorun caused the pain to ease. From his left, the giant, Terul, returned with the box his master had demanded earlier. The servant did not give him the container but rather held it before Zorun.

The mage opened the box with the lid toward Uldyssian. Zorun eagerly peered within, then removed something. Clutching the tiny object in his free hand, the bearded Kehjani indicated that Terul should shut the box.

"Replace it on the proper shelf," he commanded the giant. As Terul departed, Zorun held up his hand for Uldyssian to see what lay in the palm.

Uldyssian tried to gasp, but it appeared that his captor had again sealed his mouth. He knew what lay in the spellcaster's hand, knew it far better than Zorun likely did.

It was a small piece of the same type of crystal as that of which the Worldstone was composed.

Whether it was actually from the monstrous artifact itself, Uldyssian could not say. He only knew that he had never seen such crystal anywhere else. If it were actually a piece, the son of Diomedes could only assume that Lilith, one of the Ancients, or some demon or angel had stolen it away from the caverns. Perhaps it had been part of one of the floating crystals constantly shattering around the main stone, or perhaps it had been stolen at the time of the Worldstone's creation. He could not say.

Indeed, all that mattered was that it was here, in the hands of Zorun Tzin.

"You sense the power inherent in this? Interesting. Perhaps you are more as the council said, after all. You like my little stone? It cost a dozen lives for me to obtain it, and in the decade before I became aware of it, apparently it cost twice that! All master mages or their agents. It is incredibly ancient, that much I know...and very useful for my spellwork, as you shall see."

He squatted down. Uldyssian's eyes followed, and for the first time he noticed the edge of some pattern written in chalk. It was likely the very pattern that held him in check. Zorun placed the crimson stone on one particular symbol, which flared as the crystal touched it.

"You would do best to be very cooperative," Zorun said as he straightened. "The stone will amplify the effects of everything I desire, including your pain."

The mage raised his staff. Again, the runes glowed.

Uldyssian screamed. Now it felt as if he were being turned inside out. He saw no change, but his attempts to deny the pain went for

nothing.

As abruptly as the agony had begun, it ceased. Uldyssian would have let his head slump over if that choice had been allowed him.

The Kehjani chuckled. "What you experienced, Ascenian, can actually be done to you. I can turn your insides into your outsides. The stone is powerful enough to enable me to do that. I know, for I have tested it in that regard." He let that fact sink deep into Uldyssian's muddled mind. "An easy thing it would be, in fact—"

At that moment, Terul rushed into view. Zorun was not at all pleased by this interruption, but he listened as the giant tried to relate some imminent news.

"Upstairs..." the servant grunted. "Robes..."

The mage's expression radiated understanding. "Members of the council? Is that what you mean?"

Terul's tiny head bobbed up and down.

Zorun stroked his immaculate beard. "They cannot be here about the guards, as they've accepted the explanations for their deaths. Did they say anything to you at all about the reason for their visit?"

In reply, Terul could only shrug.

"Imbecile! Dolt! I shall have to deal with this immediately!" With a snort of frustration, Zorun waved the hulking figure aside. However, before departing, the spellcaster paused to say to Uldyssian, "This will give you a moment to put to order all information you will relate to me, Ascenian. I suggest you have it all ready for when I return. The questioning will begin in earnest then."

The mage vanished from sight. Terul remained behind, the servant watching the direction in which his master had gone.

Then an odd change came over Terul. The giant's expression twisted into something more *knowing*. His eyes once again radiated the extreme intelligence that Uldyssian thought he had briefly witnessed before.

Terul bent down and seized the crimson stone. A look of avarice spread across his grotesque features. Up close, Uldyssian noticed something else, a pair of odd lesions, almost burns, near the left ear. They looked very recent.

"Mephisto smiles upon me," the servant rumbled as he gazed up at the prisoner. His manner of speaking was now more polished and in contradiction to the mind that such a small head suggested.

Evidently, there came some sound that Uldyssian could not hear, for Terul paused to glance to the side. Then, apparently satisfied that it meant nothing, the giant returned his attention to Uldyssian. His eyes stared deeply into the captive's, and more than ever, Uldyssian was convinced that Terul was far more than Zorun Tzin assumed him

to be.

And possibly a deadlier threat to the son of Diomedes than the mage was.

“Even this body, with all its brute strength, will burn out much too soon,” Terul informed him. “I thought it would last a great deal longer, but perhaps the lack of a proper brain has something to do with it. It would be interesting to find out more concerning that. Later, of course.”

Uldyssian had no idea what the giant was talking about, only that it was hinting of a direction that he did not like in the least. He tried to focus on his powers, but Zorun’s pattern kept his mind foggy where that was concerned. The spell enabled him to listen to whoever was in front of him but allowed little more than that.

“Poor Durram,” Terul went on. “He provided me with more than I dared hope, but I knew that I wasn’t going to make it to you, regardless of how quickly I raced through the jungle. I thought to cut you off near the capital—I knew you must go to the capital—but in pushing the priest’s body so hard, I only burned it out more swiftly.”

Terul’s face continued to contort as he spoke in the unsettling, highly educated tone, and in the midst of those contortions, Uldyssian briefly felt as if he recognized something. Unfortunately, the spell on his own thoughts caused it to be a fleeting recollection.

The giant must have misread something in Uldyssian’s face. “Fear not for that fool’s imminent return. His arrogance, which I fueled by stirring all his spells to greater accomplishment, has left him open to more transgressions revealed than he imagines.” Terul cocked his head. “And lest you suppose my chatter all this while idle, you might notice that the pattern below you has been slowly adjusted for my needs.”

Even as he said it, Uldyssian felt powerful energies shifting around him. They constricted his will even more and amplified the effects on his mind to such a point that had an army poured into the chamber, Uldyssian doubted very much that he would have even noticed.

Indeed, there was for him only Terul. Nothing else existed for Uldyssian save the sinister servant...who spoke to the prisoner as if they had known each other for far longer than a few moments.

And somehow Uldyssian was certain that they had. He fought anew against the pattern’s spells, struggling by physical, magical, and mental means to do something, *anything*.

One of Terul’s overly shaggy brows rose. His dark eyes glittered enviously. “Such strength...the bitch chose well when she chose you, I will give her that much.”

His words sent Uldyssian’s tension to new heights. Terul could only

be speaking of Lilith. Yet how could he know of the she-demon?

Uldyssian managed to recall what the giant had said earlier, that he had used a priest called Durram to reach this point...used his body. That meant that this was not actually Terul, not even a living being, then, but some malign *spirit* possessing the giant.

No, not possessing. That inferred that somewhere deep within, the servant yet remained. From what Uldyssian could see, this creature had engulfed Terul's spirit. Nothing, absolutely nothing, of the giant existed.

And now the malevolent shade intended to do the same with the son of Diomedes.

At that moment, the giant's eyes widened in pleasure. "Ah! All ready!" He gave Uldyssian a monstrous grin. "With the stone and the reset pattern, I will not have to worry about burning you out. I shall be whole at last! And your body will be the one with which I will raise a new sect, one where I and I alone am supreme Primus! Mephisto will reward me well, perhaps make me master of all men."

His tone again reminded Uldyssian of someone. It was at the edge of his memory...

"And wearing your body will be much more comfortable than wearing simply the skin of someone, say, like Master Ethon of Partha?"

His captive managed to gape. It all made terrible sense.

Terul laughed as recognition at last came to the prisoner. "Yes, I wanted you to know me well before I engulfed you, Uldyssian ul-Diomed."

Uldyssian would have shaken his head in disbelief and horror if that had been at all possible. The resurrection of either Lilith or her brother would have been only slightly more monstrous in his eyes.

Terul was possessed by the spirit of the High Priest of Mefis...Malic.

Six

Serenthia felt the uneasiness strike her with all the suddenness of a lightning bolt. Something had gone wrong with Uldyssian's plan. She was certain of it.

Yet the fact that she had not been very pleased with his idea in the first place gave her pause. She had no right to supersede his commands based merely on her suspicions, no right at all. It was only a feeling, nothing more...

But, then again, she was an edyrem, and such feelings had a way of presaging actual disaster.

She sought out Mendeln, certain that he, of all people, would be able to look over her concerns with a proper analytical train of thought. He was where she could generally find him, at the remotest part of the encampment, speaking to three edyrem—a male Parthan and two lowlanders, one of them female—about something called the Balance and how death was merely a step to another level. On the one hand, Serenthia liked the thought of her father and mother still existing and even possibly watching over her. She also thanked whatever power Mendeln had drawn upon to bring Achilios back to her, albeit not quite as she would have preferred.

But there were other aspects concerning his newfound path that continued to unnerve her, especially his delving into matters concerning corpses and graves. There was also Mendeln's passing comment that he was never alone even when he was alone. From what Serenthia gathered, ghosts of the most recent dead were drawn to him, not an appetizing aspect to her.

He looked up at Serenthia before she had the opportunity to call out. He solemnly dismissed his equally solemn pupils. They silently ushered past her, and as they did, she noticed that they had taken to wearing black clothing such as Uldyssian's brother wore.

"They come to ask me questions," Mendeln said to her. "I but merely try to answer them...but that is not why you come, I know."

"Uldyssian—"

He cut her off, his expression darkening. "Uldyssian has been taken."

Cyrus's daughter was startled. "Did you feel something, too? How do you know? What exactly do you mean?"

"Calm yourself. Here is what I know. The caravan was attacked by

foul magic. All were slain but him. He was the one sought by the spellcaster.”

The news was even more terrible than she could have imagined. “When did you find all of this out?” Serenthia repeated. “I only just felt danger now!”

With a shrug, Mendeln replied, “Master Fahin told me.”

The chill that she sometimes got around the younger brother returned. “Master—Master Fahin, too?”

“All...all save Uldyssian.”

“And he? Is it the mage clans who have him?”

He drew himself up, a sign that he was not comfortable with what he knew. “One of them, at least. There were also men who perished who nominally served the spellcaster.”

This brought some slight pleasure to Serenthia. “So, not all the scoundrels escaped retribution.”

“They, too, were slaughtered by Uldyssian’s captor.”

“But that makes no sense!”

Mendeln shook his head. “Unfortunately, it does make sense, which is why I was just about to dismiss the others, anyway, and seek you out.”

She tried to think. Something had to be done and done quickly. “Do you know where Uldyssian was taken?”

“He is in the city. The mage is an individual of some high ability who calls himself Zorun Tzin. That is all I was able to find out. The spirits know nothing more, for they came immediately to me.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do they keep coming to you?” Serenthia asked with mounting frustration.

“Because it is so,” Mendeln returned with another shrug.

Serenthia surrendered. All that actually mattered now was rescuing Uldyssian...if it was not already too late. “He’s been taken to the capital, you say.”

“Yes, likely to the abode of this Zorun Tzin, whose location even the shades of the guards do not know.”

She had expected that. Serenthia also knew that they could not very well go and request that the mage clans return their leader. Somehow the merchant’s daughter felt certain that Uldyssian would “vanish” to somewhere even more impossible to find.

“We have to go to the city,” Serenthia determined. “That much I know.”

“Yes, but may I point out that if we depart, the others are surely

going to follow?" Mendeln gestured toward the rest of the encampment. "Even now, I suspect some of them, such as Saron, are beginning to feel the same uneasiness you did."

"Good! We'll tell them what you told me, and then we'll all march on Kehjan. Make the mage clans or whoever else is in charge find him, or else. All Uldyssian wanted to do was speak with them, and this is how they treat him!"

"They will see such numbers as a threat to the capital, Serenthia. They will see it as an attack."

She was undeterred. "It may very well be one if they don't return him to us safe and sound! Is that so wrong? Would you do less for him?"

Uldyssian's brother let out a great sigh. "No, though I wish the options presented to us were different. We will do as you suggest."

"Good!" Serenthia turned from him. "In that case, we'd better waste no time in alerting the rest."

She left Mendeln in her wake, at the same time shouting out Saron's and Jonas's names. Mendeln watched her for a moment and then, with a shake of his head, reluctantly followed.

"This will not be good," he muttered under his breath. "This will not be good...."

It was *Malic*...the same Malic who had callously and horrifically had the lord of Partha and his young son stripped of their flesh so that he and one of his morlu could use the skins for trappings in order to fool Uldyssian. Malic, who served the order of Mefis—in reality, the demon Mephisto. Malic, who had been the right hand of Lucion, the terrifying master of the Triune.

And though Malic had suffered some justice when he had inadvertently attacked Lilith in her guise as Lylia—and thus perished as Ethon and his son had—the high priest had returned as a spirit bound to a bit of bone procured by Mendeln. At the time, Mendeln had utilized it to help them against Lilith, for she was the one thing that Malic hated more than Uldyssian. The spirit had done his task as commanded, guiding Uldyssian through the dangers of the main temple.

However, there had come a point in one corridor when Malic's specter had commanded Uldyssian to throw the bone fragment. Accepting that there had to be a good reason, he had obeyed. A moment later, the piece had struck hard the forehead of a priest—Durram his name.

Circumstance and Lilith had forced Uldyssian to abandon any

attempt to retrieve the bone fragment, and he had assumed it and Malic's dread shade lost in the collapse of the temple. Now Uldyssian saw that he had been very, tragically, wrong.

And that mistake was going to mean oblivion for him, and his body and powers serving a man who was pure evil.

"We—or, rather, *I*—will be long gone from here by the time that fool Zorun can dare return. It was easy to sow holes in a story so full of holes already. I have manipulated his thoughts all along since taking this giant's body, building on his own vanity. That he would imagine his paltry power the reason for capturing you so easily! He was only able to do it because I, who know you so very well, my old friend, provided the true effort. I knew the chinks in your armor and played upon them." The face of Terul lit up in amusement. "And it all went so well that even I was astounded!"

Uldyssian listened. It was the only thing he could do, and it was his only tool. Malic insisted that time was on his side, but the more his prisoner appeared to pay attention, the more the high priest went on and on, like Zorun Tzin, so very proud of himself.

It was a danger of wielding such powerful skills, Uldyssian knew. He himself had already fallen prey to his ego more than once, and perhaps the fatal journey with the unfortunate Master Fahin was a grim reminder of that. Again, Uldyssian had believed himself infallible, untouchable. *He* had everything planned perfectly...or so he had thought. It now seemed so audacious, so ridiculous, to have assumed that he could just walk into the capital of the eastern half of the world and demand the right to speak with its leaders without fear of treachery or repercussions.

"Yes, I shall be able to make use of your body much, much better." Terul—no, *Malic*—clutched the fragment tight as he stepped toward Uldyssian. The giant's grin grew exceedingly sinister. "Now, is there anything you might like to confess, my son, before I grant you absolute oblivion?"

Uldyssian struggled to clear his head but feared it was too late. Malic's alterations of the mage's spell had done nothing so far to weaken its hold on him. True, that had been a desperate hope at best, but it had also been Uldyssian's *only* hope.

"Nothing? Well, we shall begin, then." Malic touched the piece of crystal to Uldyssian's chest. The high priest quietly started to chant—

And at that moment, a warmth spread from the stone into Uldyssian. At first, he thought it part of the priest's spell, but then the haze that prevented him from concentrating began to clear. His strength returned....

But the change in him did not go unnoticed. Malic's brow furrowed.

“What are—?”

The spirit got no farther. Just as he had while in the jungle with Mendeln, Uldyssian let raw emotion take hold. There was no time to do otherwise.

A furious orange glow erupted from his chest where the fragment touched.

The giant let out a howl as the fiery force burned away his skin, his sinew, and all beneath. The grotesque face became more so as the ravaging energies tore away Malic’s lips and eyelids. Then the eyes melted to empty sockets, and the jaw fell slack.

Uldyssian’s tormentor fell back in an ungainly heap.

At the same time, the spell holding the son of Diomedes prisoner finally dissipated. Unfortunately, that meant that Uldyssian, worn and beaten by not only his effort but Zorun Tzin’s tortures, dropped hard to the floor. He was unprepared to protect himself, and the simple fall left him battered and, more important, stunned.

What at last stirred him were what seemed to be voices, or maybe just one that echoed over and over in his head. Uldyssian rolled onto his side and was greeted by the stomach-wrenching sight of the scorched corpse. The crisp fingers of one hand twitched, and for a moment, Uldyssian thought Malic yet survived, but then the body fell motionless again.

Not certain if he would be able to repeat what he had done should Zorun Tzin or someone else now came upon him, Uldyssian now had only one desire: to be as far away as he could from the mage’s sanctum. Away...

And so he vanished.

* * *

Zorun could not understand not only why three of the most senior mages serving the council’s enforcement arm had taken it upon themselves to come to his abode but why they had questioned absolutely everything he said as if they already knew he spoke lies. He sensed no truth spell and knew that, as gifted as they were, this trio—even tall, spindly Nurzani—did not have the power to cast one that he, Zorun Tzin, could not in a moment ferret out.

The three stood before him like reapers, each wearing the orange and brown voluminous cloaks with the narrow, high-peaked hoods of the enforcement order. Kethuus could barely be seen within his hood, his skin nearly as black as shadow. Only his wily eyes were really visible. Amolia, who traced her bloodline to the Ascenian colonists whose descendants now filled much of the northern part of the

capital, was in comparison like a ghost. Her skin was as pale as ivory, and Zorun knew that a full day in the sun would not make it different.

“The Merchants Guild is insisting on a full investigation into Master Fahin’s death,” Amolia had smoothly been saying. “And we, naturally, concur.”

Zorun had expected that; some of his counterparts made good use of the merchants’ trade routes and ties to gather items that they needed for their private work. Fahin’s death, while not affecting Zorun, had likely badly set back the spellwork of several of the council.

Still, he had given them answers that should have completely satisfied everyone when first he had informed his employers of his “failure” and Uldyssian’s “bloodthirstiness.” It had been quite simple to think of just what to say at the time, as he had afterward told Terul.

So why now did even Zorun have trouble with his own story?

“I will be happy to provide the facts again, when a hearing should convene,” he replied, knowing that he could say nothing less. By the time a hearing was put together, the loose threads that had begun appearing in his story as if by magic would be dealt with.

“Consider it to be convening now, Zorun Tzin,” Kethuus murmured.

Emaciated Nurzani—whose powers for good reasons Zorun most respected—raised a bony hand. A yellow aura briefly coalesced around Zorun’s front doorway. In a deep and startling baritone, the skeletal mage boomed, “By vote of the council, the mage clans give us right to begin a formal inquest into your actions, second son of Liov Tzin.”

That any of them would invoke the name of his famous father was not a good sign. It was a sign that Nurzani did not worry about offending Zorun by pointing out that he was neither his sire nor his sire’s firstborn.

Caught off-guard, Zorun thought feverishly about what to say next, at the same time wishing that something would distract the trio from this inquest.

And that was when the building shook. Rare vials and other arcane objects that sat in places of honor in his public room—as Kehjani called the elegant chambers that guests to their homes were initially ushered into—came crashing down. Zorun did not need to see the faces of the others to know that they felt the rush of untamed and powerful energies radiating through the floor and walls. Even an utterly untalented street vendor would have sensed them.

But he, unlike Zorun, would have run as far away as he could from the source...not turned and raced *toward* it.

Yet Zorun had no choice. Something unfathomable had happened

below, and his only hope of salvaging anything was to discover the truth before the others could.

"Z-Zorun Tzin!" Amolia called as she sought to keep her balance. "You are not—not given permission to leave!"

Ignoring her, the bearded mage leapt through an inner doorway, then sealed it magically behind him. That would buy him a few minutes at best, but a few minutes meant all the difference. As he descended the stone steps leading to his true sanctum, Zorun sought in vain a logical reason for the unknown disaster. Terul would have touched nothing. Terul had been beaten enough to know never to touch anything his master did not order him to touch. Yet the spellcaster had to assume that something had gone dreadfully wrong with the pattern that kept the Ascenian at bay and that somehow his manservant had to be at least partially responsible. Otherwise, that meant that the Ascenian had destroyed all the holding spells by himself.

Perhaps the stories he had heard had actually *underplayed* Uldyssian ul-Diomed's might? Zorun could not believe that. Still, what other answer could there be?

He burst through the wooden door at the base of the steps, the staff ready for whatever protective spell he needed. Yet within there was no immediate threat, but instead absolute ruin.

The walls of the chamber were blackened, as if a terrible fire had rushed through the room. All the treasures, tools, and other arcane items that Zorun had gathered over his long life had been reduced to ash or melted globs.

But most important, the pattern had been eradicated, and of his captive there was no sign.

Zorun swore. Without Uldyssian, he had nothing with which to bargain with the others. His head was now on the block, a turn of events that he could have never foreseen. He was Zorun Tzin, after all! One against one, there were few his equal.

But against three who represented the power of the mage council...

Already he could sense their approach. They had gotten through the first doorway but would find an invisible barrier halfway down the steps. That gave Zorun a few more moments...but to do just what?

He thought of the crystal fragment, but a survey of the pattern did not reveal it. Naturally, Uldyssian had seen its value and taken it.

Then he cast his bitter gaze down upon the sorry sight of his servant. Zorun almost spat at the corpse, again blaming Terul for certainly playing *some* part in the mage's downfall...but then he noticed the fingers of one hand seek to open.

The giant was still alive, if barely, and in his hand, he kept a feeble

hold on the crystal.

As impressed with his own good fortune as he was with Terul's refusal to die, Zorun Tzin closed on the hapless figure. The crystal would balance matters out. How exactly that would happen had not yet occurred to the spellcaster, but it was a straw he was happy to grasp.

Not at all fearing a burnt man's touch, Zorun sought to pluck the fragment free.

As his fingers wrapped around the fragment...Terul's ruined ones wrapped around both. Tightly.

Zorun Tzin groaned. The world around him felt as if on fire. Something burst through that fire, a monstrous black shape that lived on pure hatred—hatred for one man, the spellcaster belatedly sensed.

The Ascenian, Uldyssian.

And then that which had been the great Zorun Tzin was engulfed.

The three mages burst into the lower chamber, ready to mete out punishment on the obviously guilty member of their calling...only to find nothing but destruction. The entire underground room had been ravaged by fearsome magical energies, the evidence of its intensity displayed graphically by the corpse of what they knew to be Zorun's halfwitted servant.

But of the culprit, of Zorun Tzin himself, there was no sign.

Amolia all but floated about the chamber, inspecting shelves and corners with practiced eyes. Nurzani bent to examine the fragments that were all that remained of a pattern recently drawn. Kethuus went to investigate the body and the object next to it, the missing mage's rune-enchanted staff.

"There is nothing of value left on the shelves, and they themselves do not hide a secret path out of here," Amolia declared after completing a circle. "The corners and the shadows likewise hide no avenue of escape that my arts can unveil."

From the pattern, Nurzani boomed, "This was originally designed not only to hold something powerful but also to disrupt its ability to concentrate. But someone has altered the design in a manner not of the mage clans' teachings."

"So Zorun attempted something unusual?"

"These few lines here are not from our ways. They remind me...of the Triune."

Amolia glided closer. She peered down at what Nurzani indicated. "We suspected that Zorun had taken one or two survivors for questioning..." What happened to members of the Triune was of little

concern to the mage clans, so long as their fates did not reflect publicly on the spellcasters. “Perhaps one of them escaped.”

“Zorun Tzin, whatever we think him, could certainly handle a priest of the Temple,” the gaunt mage replied with a snort.

“Indeed. Kethuus, you are oddly silent.”

The shadowy figure remained bent by the corpse. “This was Terul, of course, but there’s something odd about him. It feels as if he was slain *days* ago, not mere moments.”

“The halfwit answered the door; he hardly looked dead then.”

Kethuus grinned mirthlessly. “Perhaps his little brain hadn’t yet registered that fact.”

The other two joined him. Amolia prodded the body with her sandaled foot. Part of Terul’s rib cage caved in.

“He suffered far more than the rest of this place. He was the focus of the attack.”

“The giant would be the least of any prisoner’s problems,” the dark mage responded. Then, shrugging, he added, “But I concur that he was the focus.”

Nurzani emitted a disgruntled sound that brought him to the attention of the pair. “And has no one else considered the even more significant clue before our eyes?”

Amolia’s gaze narrowed. “What is that?”

He pointed near the corpse. “Zorun Tzin has left his staff. That staff is a prize to any mage, yet Zorun Tzin has abandoned it. Why?”

Neither other spellcaster could give him an answer...and that bothered all three so very much.

Oris fretted like a mother as she strode past the elegantly carved twin doors for the hundredth time that day. They remained sealed even from the very guards standing just outside them. The Prophet had not been out of his personal chambers in days, something the gray-haired priestess could find no reference to in all the journals kept by herself and her predecessors. He had *never* gone into such seclusion, and thus she feared the worst.

“You do yourself and him no favor worrying so, dear Oris,” the voice of Gamuel called. The other senior priest strode down the shining marble corridor like a warrior, which he had been until the Prophet had shown him the light. Gamuel was a little younger than Oris and had not held his post quite so long, but he was every bit as devoted as she. “He likely has good reason for what he does, and if he deems us worthy of sharing in that knowledge when he emerges—and he will emerge, Oris—then you’ll see how silly it was to fret.”

“You would think that he might wish us to know how he is so that we can assuage any concerns of the flock,” she returned. Oris did nothing to hide her love—her *physical* love—for her master. She had been a beautiful woman when she had first come to the Cathedral, and traces of that beauty remained in her oval face even now. However, the Prophet had only seen her as he had all the rest: as one of his children.

Still, Oris had never told even Gamuel a suspicion that she had about their leader, that his heart had once belonged to another female, one who had been unworthy of him. Oris was certain that this was one of the reasons he had not chosen her when she was young. Now that she resembled more his grandmother, there were a thousand other bitter reasons.

But still she loved him, and like wife, mother, and grandmother combined, she tried to take on whatever she imagined his troubles as her own burden.

Gamuel politely took her by the arm so as not to embarrass her before the guards. “As for the flock, some matters have come up that must be discussed immediately.”

The distraction worked. Oris became the veteran that she was. “The peasants’ army? Has it regrouped?”

“Somewhat, but, as you know, they were just a necessary sacrifice to awaken the people to the fanatics’ true nature.”

Both paused to make a momentary prayer to those who had perished futilely attacking Uldyssian ul-Diomed’s followers. The Prophet had explained that the dead would have an honored place in the teachings of the Cathedral.

Finishing her prayer, Oris asked, “Then what is it?”

“We knew that the Ascenian intended to go speak with the mage clans, the guilds, and probably even the prince, but something happened, and he disappeared, leaving many dead in his wake.”

The priestess nodded gravely. “I had thought it the Prophet—”

“And it may be. He’ll tell us if and when he chooses. That’s not important now. What’s important is that the Ascenian’s people now know he’s missing, and his rabble’s only two days from the gates of the capital even as we speak!”

Oris paused in mid-step. She stared into the broad-shouldered man’s face, seeing that he was not exaggerating. That made her immediately look back at the sculpted doors. “He *must* know of that! He wouldn’t let them march on the city without doing something about it. He must come out now and tell us what to do next!”

They stood there, even Gamuel—caught up by her declaration—expecting the Prophet to fling open the doors and stride out to ease

their troubled minds with some great plan.

But the entrance remained sealed.

Seven

Uldyssian had no notion where he stumbled or even how he had gotten there in the first place. He only knew that he had to keep going. His explosive effort against Malic, with what he had already suffered at the hands of Zorun Tzin, had left him like one of Mendeln's walking dead.

He was not even certain where he was anymore. Vaguely, Uldyssian noted others on the streets through which he wended. Mostly dark of skin, not light like home. Toraja? Hashir? No...those were in the past. Where was this? Kehjan? Yes, that was it. The capital.

The capital. Who was it he had needed to see here? Not mages. Uldyssian dared not put himself in the hands of mages. At the moment, they were to him as treacherous a lot as the Triune or the Cathedral.

Who else, then? There had been someone. Master Fahin. He had mentioned someone. Who—

A prince. Uldyssian recalled a prince. Amrin? No. Emrad? *Ehmad*.

"Ehmad," he gasped. "I need Ehmad. The prince..."

He weaved past shops and places where raw foodstuffs were sold, occasionally blundering into someone. Most of the Kehjani tried to pretend he did not exist, although a couple muttered something in a vile tone as Uldyssian brushed past.

To one who merely glanced at the ragged figure as he traversed the capital's high-walled, narrow avenues, Uldyssian appeared to be wandering aimlessly. He staggered into one area, then another. Yet even though he himself did not realize it, he headed exactly where he needed to.

The two white horses reared when the stranger stepped out of the shadows before them. Trained not only for the task of pulling a chariot but also to defend the ones riding it, they sent their hooves crashing down at Uldyssian.

But somehow, not one hit. As the son of Diomedes registered the animals' presence, the horses grew oddly quiet. They stepped back, then waited.

The charioteer, who had been shouting at the beasts, grunted in approval of himself, in the mistaken belief that it had been his efforts that had enabled him to regain control. Behind the soldier, standing with one hand on the rim of the golden chariot, a young, handsome

figure in equally resplendent breastplate and metal kilt peered at the cause of the near collision. Rich, dark brown eyes focused on the Ascenian in the path.

Less interested, the charioteer raised his whip to ward off what he no doubt thought a beggar or madman. However, his master grabbed his wrist.

“Prince...Prince Ehmada...” Uldyssian uttered, weaving to and fro at the same time.

“Yes, that is who I am.” The voice was strong and full of the confidence of youth.

“Master Fahin...he said to find you...” Mentally, Uldyssian began to feel more himself, but physically he was exhausted.

“Master Fahin.” The prince’s expression grew calculating. “Sehkar. Help him onto the chariot.”

“My lord,” growled the charioteer. “It was ill advised enough to take this ride without escort, but to bring this—whatever he may be—so near your person—”

“Do as I command, Sehkar.”

With much grumbling, the driver handed the reins to his master, then leapt out to deal with Uldyssian. The son of Diomedes eyed the man warily but then glanced again at the prince. Ehmada gave him a polite nod that somehow put him at ease.

“Come, you!” Sehkar commanded, grabbing for Uldyssian’s arm. Around them, a crowd had begun forming.

The soldier’s arrogant attitude drew Uldyssian’s sudden ire. He glared at the man, instinctively summoning his power.

At that moment, Prince Ehmada called out, “Treat him with respect, Sehkar!”

The charioteer relaxed his hold. Uldyssian fought down his anger and, with it, the potentially explosive repercussions.

With Sehkar guiding, the pair joined Ehmada. The prince himself assisted Uldyssian up.

“Thank you,” Uldyssian managed wearily.

Ehmada inspected him. “You are no beggar. Your bruises, they seem the eager work of someone. You mention Master Fahin. You knew him?”

It suddenly felt as if the entire world sat upon Uldyssian’s shoulders. “I was there when he...when he died.”

“You—” The noble gave him a tight-lipped smile. “It seems good fortune smiles upon me today to have run across you so accidentally.”

“It wasn’t good fortune. I wanted to find you.”

Prince Ehmada looked around them. “Indeed! I think it best we talk more at my palace. Take us there, Sehkar.”

“Gladly, and with haste,” muttered the charioteer. He cracked the whip and, as the horses started running, tugged hard on the reins in order to make them turn.

The crowds pushed back as the prince’s chariot shifted around. Prince Ehmud waved to the people, who cheered him. Uldyssian could see that their enthusiasm was real. They truly liked the young man.

He wondered how they would feel if they knew who their prince had in the chariot with him.

Sehkar cracked the whip again, then gave out a yell. The horses picked up the pace. The chariot and its riders swiftly left the crowd behind.

But not before Uldyssian caught an ever so brief glimpse of a familiar face among them, a face he had not expected to see.

The brooding face of Zorun Tzin.

HE...

HE...

Inarius had sat in utter darkness in the chambers that he used as the Prophet, sat in the silken chair staring beyond the walls. Staring at a place he had ceased calling home centuries ago.

HE...THAT VERMIN THAT SHE SEDUCED...

He did not wear the guise of the Prophet now, but more or less had resumed his true form. Inarius had no fear of discovery; an army of his acolytes could not have breached the doors, and no one with even the hearing of a bat could have noted a sound within.

ULDYSSIAN...SPAWN OF A FOOL NAMED DIOMEDES...HE DARED DO IT....

Inarius had not moved since his return from invading the mortal’s dream, but now he leapt up, wings spread in glorious fury and arms outstretched in righteous anger at this latest sin.

HE...ULDYSSIAN...HE DARED BRING ME PAIN!

It should not have been possible, but it had happened. During his intrusion into the human’s dreams, Inarius had easily manipulated the mortal’s mind, letting him believe that his powers were no more. He had done it to give Uldyssian the chance to beg for forgiveness, beg for the chance to be one of the angel’s flock again.

But instead of seeing sense, the sinner had dared *strike* him! Indeed, although Uldyssian imagined that his attack had failed miserably, it had, in truth, seared through Inarius, disrupting for the slightest of moments his very resonance.

For just that brief moment, the angel had been, by mortal standards, *dead*.

And while Inarius was not mortal, he had experienced the emptiness of a universe without him, and that had shaken his very foundation. Not even in the battles against the Burning Hells had he come so close to such a fate. Oh, he had felt pain before, especially during battles against the demons, but this had been something far different—and the work of a mere human, yet!

Uldyssian ul-Diomed had to be punished for his grave sin. His life had to be crushed, his very existence cursed by all, then, finally, all knowledge of his abilities erased from the memories of the rest of the mortals. It was the least he should suffer for all he had done.

And with him had to go the edyrem. Inarius had considered one method or another of bringing the rest back into the flock once Uldyssian was pacified, but they were tainted with the same filthy traits as Linarian, worse even. Whatever alteration on the Worldstone Lilith had done had created a thing more foul than their son.

Indeed, Uldyssian himself had also altered the Worldstone, and in a manner impossible. Inarius hesitated as he recalled that. One reason he had wanted to turn the mortal to his cause was that he wanted to make Uldyssian reverse the change in the artifact's crystalline structure. He needed the fool to do it, because every attempt by the angel, who was not only bound to the artifact but drew upon it for his tremendous might, had gone for nothing.

NO...HE MUST DIE.... THERE MUST BE ANOTHER WAY TO HEAL THE STONE.... EVEN IF I MUST START WITH ONLY IT AND NOTHING ELSE IN ALL OF SANCTUARY...

A thousand methods by which to punish the human properly for his transgressions coursed through Inarius's mind, but each had a fault. They all required the angel to confront Uldyssian directly. He saw no reason for that. Uldyssian was beneath him, not even as worthy as a worm crawling in the ground. There was no need for Inarius to debase himself by such close contact again, no need. It had nothing to do with the unexpected pain; it was merely unworthy of the angel.

But...if it was a task unworthy of him...

Inarius stared at the sealed doorway, then suddenly gestured.

The doors flung open.

GAMUEL, I WOULD SPEAK WITH YOU, MY CHERISHED SERVANT....

The powerfully built priest dropped the scroll from which he had been reading and quickly abandoned his private quarters. He had been doing his best to monitor matters concerning the capital since his conversation with Oris, feeling that the Prophet would expect it of him.

To his further astonishment, he arrived to find the doorway wide open. The guards saluted him sharply as he neared, their spirits revived by their master's "awakening."

"Gamuel!" Oris came charging from another corridor. "I was just alerted by a guard. When did—"

"I can't speak now. The Prophet has summoned me!"

She looked disconcerted. "Summoned *you*? What about me? I heard nothing from him!"

"I only know that he summoned me, and the summons was urgent," Gamuel responded with as much patience as he could muster. "Really, Oris, I must go to him!"

The female priest did not argue that point, but neither did she slow. Clearly, it was her intention to join the audience, and Gamuel would not stop her. The Prophet would bid her to leave if he did not wish her there.

Gamuel reached the entrance. Oris followed at his heels and then halted as if striking an invisible wall. She tried to step forward but instead moved *back*.

The male priest eyed her sympathetically as he continued on. The Prophet had made his will known. This audience was for Gamuel only.

The doors shut on Oris's disbelieving face. Gamuel forced her from his thoughts. He doubted that she had offended the Prophet in some manner; the master merely had some thought that he believed Gamuel could better discuss alone with him.

What it was, the priest could not fathom.

The golden-haired youth awaited him not on the long, elegant couch where he often rested but in the very center of the chamber. The Prophet stood not in repose but in what Gamuel would have taken for—had it been any other person—pensiveness. The Prophet's hands were clasped behind his back, and his eyes watched with impatience the priest's swift steps.

Gamuel went down on one knee before him. Bowing his head low, he muttered, "Forgive my sloth, great Prophet! I sought to be as the wind but fell short...."

"We all have our failings, my child," the glorious figure declared. "And so when we fall to them, we do seek to quickly make amends, do we not?"

"In whatever manner I can, I shall! I swear!"

The Prophet touched him lightly on the shoulder, causing Gamuel to look up. "You are a man of many skills, Gamuel. You are one who has also lived so many aspects of life, however short human life is."

"I've gone down...several paths," the priest agreed. He did not like to talk about his past endeavors, especially those related to his years

as a soldier and, on occasion, mercenary.

“And if some paths led you astray from the light, they did also teach you much that helped make you who you are today.”

The master’s words touched Gamuel, who still retained some guilt for events in his past. Each day, he tried to live as the Prophet preached, using the Prophet’s own life as his example.

“Rise, my child.”

The priest obeyed.

The Prophet proudly looked him over. “Good Gamuel, you were once well skilled in the arts of war, especially.”

“A sorry time for me. I try to forget—”

His answer brought a reproving glance from his master. As Gamuel let his head drop, the Prophet quietly remarked, “Lies ill become you. You still practice moves in your private quarters, then pray for my forgiveness. You are yet every bit the warrior that you were when first I found you.”

“I...am...sorry!”

“Why? The Cathedral has its Inquisitors. Are they so different?”

Trying to look dignified, the broad-shouldered priest returned, “Master, you know what I did as a...a fighter. My sins are as great as those of all the Inquisitor guards and officers put together!”

“And yet you stand at my hand, do you not?”

“A miracle of which I feel unworthy.”

The Prophet granted him the glory of a smile. “Would you seek to feel more worthy? Would you wish to prove yourself as none other can to me?”

Gamuel now understood why he alone had been summoned. The Prophet had a special task for him! The priest’s eyes brightened. He was honored beyond belief. “I would give my life and soul, if it must be!”

“As you should, my child, and as you might. This is no easy affair. I must trust that nothing will deter you from seeing it through.”

“I swear, nothing will! Nothing! Just tell me what I must do!”

Steepling his fingers, the Prophet calmly said, “I grant you the glory of personally removing from life the sinner Uldyssian ul-Diomed.”

Despite the bluntness with which the words were said, it took Gamuel several seconds to understand them. Then, as realization struck him, he put on an expression of fanatic determination. “I shall bring his head to you!”

“His death shall be enough. You have the skills, both with the spells I have taught you and, more important, the training of your life.”

Beaming, Gamuel stood straight. “Consider it done, master!” Then a brief hesitation came over him. “Forgive this one question...but for so

long, Oris and I urged something to this effect, and you forbade it—”

The eternal youth nodded. “And now I do not.”

It was enough of an answer for one so devoted as the priest. He bent low again, kissing the Prophet’s hand.

“It shall be done, master.”

And because he kept his head low, Gamuel did not see the hardening of the young face. “Yes, I shall make certain of it, Gamuel. I shall...”

Mendeln assisted Serenthia in leading the edyrem as they marched on the city, but he knew that if it came to it, hers would be the orders they would follow. That suited him, for he felt uncomfortable leading armies.

They met with no resistance the first day. The villages that lay in their path emptied of people before they neared. Mendeln was glad about that, for it meant less chance that innocents would suffer. However, he knew that would soon change, for there was no chance that the capital itself might be abandoned. There, some would try their best to slaughter the edyrem.

However, it turned out that they did not have to wait until the capital for their first confrontation. The mounted patrol the edyrem encountered numbered a good hundred men and, to Mendeln’s eyes, had likely been created by combining two or three smaller patrols. The men were grim of aspect and obviously well aware that they were tremendously outnumbered, but they held their ground.

In a scene reminiscent of the encounter with Master Fahin’s guards, the chosen captain demanded that they turn away.

“We mean no harm,” Serenthia responded, her tone hinting that she found the officer’s order absurd under the circumstances. “You’d best move aside.”

The Kehjani patrol did no such thing. The captain tried one more time. “You are ordered by the august authority granted to me by the grand capital to either disperse or surrender yourself to my control!”

In the front ranks, Jonas and some of the other edyrem laughed defiantly at the officer’s demand. Serenthia herself wore a smirk.

Mendeln grew worried. Taking the forefront, he said, “There is no need for concern, captain. If I could—”

A soldier went flying off his horse. Some of the edyrem laughed as he landed hard.

The captain wasted no time in drawing his weapon. “Arrest them!”

And as quickly as that, pandemonium broke out. The mounted guards charged. Edyrem rushed up to meet them. Mendeln looked to

Serenthia for assistance in curbing the violence, but she was at the head of those going into battle.

No! This should not happen! This destroys any hope of peacefully rescuing Uldyssian! But only Mendeln seemed to see that. The edyrem had given in to their emotions yet again. Like Uldyssian in the jungle that night, they let their powers control them more than they controlled their powers.

The Kehjani soldiers paid the price for that. A hundred armed men on horseback were nothing to thousands of edyrem. Mendeln did not have to see the struggle to know that the riders were being torn to ribbons without so much as landing a glancing blow against the invaders.

In desperation, he forced his way toward Serenthia. Only she could make the others listen, but first he had to make *her* do the same.

Only because of the edyrem's almost-inherent unease of him did Mendeln manage to reach her quickly. He seized Serenthia by the arm and tried to pull her back.

Her fury startled him. "Mendeln, you fool! Let me go! Now!"

"Serenthia! Look what is becoming of you—of all of you!" Even as he spoke, a soldier let out a horrific shriek. Mendeln saw the head and an arm go flying through the air. "This is the work of beasts, not men!"

"They brought this on themselves! They—"

Mendeln had been surrounded by ghosts so consistently that he paid their presence little mind save when he required an answer to something. Rarely did they speak without being spoken to.

Yet now there came from more than one a sense of impending threat that made the black-robed figure not only ignore his friend's demand to be released but instead pull her harder toward him.

The arrow did not hit her, as clearly had been intended. Instead, the angle sent it soaring into his shoulder with such velocity that Mendeln was thrown to the ground.

That alone brought Serenthia to her senses. She grabbed for him even as he fell, resulting in her dropping with him. Around them, the edyrem continued forward unchecked.

"Mendeln! Mendeln!" The merchant's daughter used her body to protect his from the crush.

While he did not have his brother's remarkable recuperative powers, Mendeln did have other resources upon which to call. He used the techniques that Rathma had taught him for reducing pain, managing to bring the searing agony to a dull, insistent throb. "I—I will be fine, Serenthia..."

"I'll make the soldier who shot you pay, I promise."

He clutched her forearm tight. "Serenthia...do not blind yourself. The bolt was not meant for me."

"No, but it hit you because you tried to save me!" Her eyes burned with fury.

"Listen! I said not to blind yourself. I want you to gaze at the arrow, which should not have come so close to you in the first place save for one obvious reason."

She finally looked—truly looked—and her mouth went slack. Serenthia shook her head.

Like Mendeln, she easily recognized an arrow crafted by Achilios.

"He would not—he would not try to slay me—or even you!"

"He would." Uldyssian's brother seized the shaft. Summoning all he knew from Rathma and the dragon, he worked to free the arrow. "He already tried with Uldyssian."

As he freed the shaft, Serenthia quickly put her hand to the wound. It healed so quickly that even Mendeln, who knew how powerful she was, gasped in surprise.

Around them, the flow had slowed. There were few sounds of violence. It was already too late for the soldiers, and Mendeln mourned that terrible mistake. How could they peacefully approach the leaders of Kehjan now?

But that was a point of contention for later. Serenthia knelt over him, unable to believe this latest vile betrayal by her love. "He would never! Not Uldyssian!"

"He did. That night when my brother and I took the two bodies beyond the encampment—" Mendeln grimaced at the memory of what had nearly happened. "It was a miracle that Uldyssian survived."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Achilios's marksmanship. He would have hit your heart with ease. I was fortunate enough not to be the target and so only received this—simple wound."

"And Uldyssian?"

"Any nearer the heart, and he would have been instantly slain. Somehow, though, Achilios just missed. He never *just* misses...unless he wishes to."

This brightened Serenthia's mood. "You see? He would've done the same for me!"

"Let us be grateful that we did not have to see whether that was true or not. And it does not excuse him for trying, does it?"

"But he saved our lives against that giant demon! Why would he then try to slay us?"

"Not him...another. An angel, I believe, who is *not* Inarius."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Not possible. There is no such

being!”

“More than possible, I am afraid, especially to Rathma and Trag’Oul, who have been suspiciously absent. What they know, I would like to also.”

“Does this—does this other angel work with Inarius?”

Mendeln finally felt well enough to rise, which he did with her assistance. He eyed the arrow as he straightened. “I doubt that he does, at least directly. He is an enigma that we have little time to solve, especially now that we are at war with Kehjan.”

Serenthia glanced around, for the first time noticing the subdued atmosphere. She knew as well as he what that meant in terms of the lives of a hundred men. “It couldn’t be helped, Mendeln! It couldn’t!”

“There is so much that ‘couldn’t be helped,’” he retorted almost bitterly. “So much. What are the edyrem—what are you and Uldyssian—becoming, Serenthia? I saw his powers consume his mind, just as I saw them do the same to you and the rest here. As you grow more comfortable in them, they grow more dominating of you.”

“Ridiculous!” Her tone suddenly bordered on anger—anger at him. “Maybe you’re just a little envious, Mendeln!”

He had seen that same look just before the edyrem had rushed the soldiers. Mendeln quickly diverted Serenthia back to the other subject. “You know that Achilios would not wish to slay you, that this arrow —” He held the feathered end before her eyes. The anger at him faded, replaced by sorrow at the archer’s continued absence. “—was intended for you by another. Another angel, I am certain of that.”

“But Achilios missed!” the dark-haired woman said proudly. “He missed both of us despite that!”

“Indeed...and what do you suppose that angel will think of that, Serenthia?” Mendeln tried not to imagine the hunter at this very moment. “What do you suppose he will demand of Achilios for that failure?”

The color drained from her face.

* * *

Achilios was caught between relief and concern. Mendeln’s unexpected reaction had saved the archer from possibly succeeding despite every iota of his will striving for the opposite. When he had discovered that Uldyssian had survived, Achilios could only assume that it had been his own powerful determination that had made the difference. That had been his one hope when finally commanded to fire at Serenthia.

He was glad that Mendeln had made it unnecessary for him to find

out if he had been right.

Once again, Achilios had fled even before the shaft neared its target. He was now deep in the jungle, although the path had been a more meandering one than last time. The edyrem were moving into more and more populated areas, which meant individual settlements in unexpected places. Neither he nor his tormentor desired him to be seen.

And even as he thought of the angel, Achilios felt his limbs slow. He came to a stumbling halt in a densely overgrown area that allowed so little light that he almost felt as if night had fallen again.

His body no longer obeyed him. Achilios wondered if he was to fall unconscious again, as had happened in the past. For one who was dead, unconsciousness was an unsettling thing. Achilios had been afraid of waking up buried or being burned.

When more than a minute passed and he still stood there, the archer finally lost his temper. He knew that it was ill advised to rail against the being but did not care. Achilios had already been forced to try to kill the two people dearest to him. What more monstrous thing could the angel expect?

Monstrous...angel, The irony of such thoughts all tied together was not lost on Achilios.

At that moment, the familiar glow erupted at his side. Despite its brightness, no one but Achilios was near enough to notice it.

“All...right! I did your damned work again...but someone outsmarted you! I saw it as I was fleeing, and I know bloody well that...that you did, too!”

THE BROTHER OF ULDYSSIAN DID NOT SAVE HER.

“What?” The words sent a sudden panic through the undead hunter. “No! I saw the shaft...the shaft miss her! She’s alive! She’s got to be—”

The ethereal warrior formed in the light. Somehow the blazing energy that radiated where his eyes were supposed to be seemed to hint at pity for Achilios. *YOU MISUNDERSTAND. SHE LIVES, BUT IT WAS NOT HE WHO SAVED THE FEMALE. THAT WAS YOU, ARCHER, JUST AS BEFORE.*

He could not have given the blond hunter a better answer. Achilios grinned wide—an image that would have frightened any mortal seeing him—then gestured defiantly at the winged figure. “I did it? I beat you then! Kill them...kill them both...you commanded...but I didn’t.”

He said this expecting—nay, *hoping*—that the angel would grow so incensed that he would destroy Achilios on the spot. Then there would be no possibility of the archer being forced to try over.

But no celestial fire burned him to cinder. Instead, the heavenly

light around the winged being dulled. The towering figure cocked his head.

NO. YOU DID NOT,...AND THAT MAY CHANGE EVERYTHING.

Eight

The palace consisted of four rounded buildings surrounding a fifth one several times their size. Small, decorative points topped each. The main entrance was a wide, columned affair that could only be reached by a lengthy series of wide stone steps.

Six columns flanked each side of the brass doorway. Every column had been carved to resemble some animal respected by the ancient Kehjani builders, including the great cats of the jungle and the massive, prehensile-snouted creatures the lowlanders used for heavy burdens.

He was ushered inside by the prince, who seemed far less in awe of himself than his followers were. Uldyssian marveled at such a lack of ego from one who clearly had the hearts of many in the capital.

Perhaps he was not the first to show some indication of this, for as they walked down a corridor filled with brilliantly painted images of human and jungle life, Ehmada cheerfully informed his guest, "I have no true standing in Kehjan, you know. The mage clans and guilds such as the merchants rule outright here. If they wished, one of them could just come in here and have my head!"

Uldyssian doubted that it would be as simple as that. Ehmada's rivals would then probably have an insurrection on their hands that even the mage clans could not suppress. If Master Fahin was an example, there were even those among the guilds and clans themselves who willingly supported the young noble.

A black-haired girl in a low-cut blouse and billowing, gauzy leg coverings raced barefoot to greet Prince Ehmada. In her delicate hands, she held a small, decorated tray with a silver goblet atop it.

Ehmada gave her a smile that made her giggle. However, instead of drinking from the goblet, he proffered it to Uldyssian. "You look like you could use this better, my friend!"

Unable to argue, Uldyssian gratefully accepted the drink, which proved to be one of the sweet wines that he had heard were favored in the capital. Parched, he swallowed it in only three gulps.

Retrieving the goblet from Uldyssian, the prince gave it to his servant. "Kaylei, bring us tea and some fruit at the Balcony of the Chadaka King."

"Yes, my prince." Kaylei bent low, then retreated from their sight.

There were few guards around and none near Ehmada himself. The

prince walked with Uldyssian as if they were old friends, not two strangers who had met but a short time ago. The son of Diomedes finally decided that the young noble was either very reckless or very daring...or both.

And then Ehmada surprised him further by casually commenting, "You are not at all what I expected, Uldyssian ul-Diomed."

Suddenly, all the courtesy and friendliness struck Uldyssian as nothing more than false front. He leapt back from the prince. The few sentries reacted immediately, charging toward the duo with spears ready.

"No!" shouted Ehmada at the men. "To your places."

It said something for his command of them that the guards obeyed without hesitation. Ehmada's dark eyes studied Uldyssian.

"I will have my little jests, won't I? They will get me killed, my mother used to say. Judging by your expression and the fact that your hands now glow the color of molten iron, I suspect that I came closer than I first imagined."

Uldyssian looked down at his hands and saw that the prince had not exaggerated. His hands were now a burning orange and radiating a similar heat.

"I'm sorry," he told Ehmada, mentally willing the hands to return to normal.

But they did not.

Unaware of the truth, Prince Ehmada took Uldyssian's continued display as distrust. "I knew who you were the moment I saw you. Master Fahin saw to that."

"Master Fahin?" As he listened, Uldyssian concentrated harder. The glow emanating from his hands cooled, then finally disappeared. The heat dwindled away a breath or two after.

"You did not know? Master Fahin, he sent a pair of messenger birds on the night he agreed to bring you to the city. He wished me to know in advance of your coming." The handsome youth looked sad. "He was a strong supporter and a stronger friend...."

Uldyssian looked down at himself. "You knew who I was even though I resembled a beggar?"

"I had but to look into your eyes. Master Fahin was right about them." What that meant, Ehmada did not say. Instead, he gestured to a corridor on the right. "Come, let us go to the Balcony of the Chadaka King."

Their destination was indeed a huge balcony overlooking a good portion of the northern part of the city. It also had, as Uldyssian had expected, images of chadaka, the large tailed primates he knew lived in the nearby jungle. Although they were not the only primates

worshipped in Kehjan, the chadaka were considered the cleverest, and in the lowlands, he had come across many myths of their king, whose antics taught valuable lessons about pride and rule.

The floor itself, a mosaic masterpiece using hexagonal pieces, had an array of chadaka kings scampering about. The rails were also carved to resemble chadaka kings trying, sometimes unsuccessfully, to sit in contemplative repose. There were chairs—brass ones with padded seats—near the edge, for which Uldyssian was grateful. He had managed a second wind once discovering that he had found Prince Ehmada, but that wind was failing him now. He all but fell into the nearest chair.

“Forgive me,” declared the prince. “I should have given you a place to sleep.”

“I don’t dare right now.”

“Ah, but all men must sleep. Even you, I imagine.”

“Not now...” Still, the chair felt more and more comfortable.

With a shrug, Ehmada sat not in the other chair but rather on the stone rail. His expression grew more serious. “What happened to Master Fahin?”

That question stirred Uldyssian back to waking. Summoning his wits, he told Prince Ehmada everything he could recall. The prince’s eyes widened as he heard about the magical attack, then narrowed at the death of the well-liked merchant.

“I have...sources...who say that you are responsible, my Ascenian friend. Sources who heard this among the mages.”

“I would’ve never killed Fahin or any of the rest. That work was done by one of their own, Zorun Tzin.”

The name did not appear to surprise Prince Ehmada. “Zorun Tzin is known well to me. He is a jackal among men. For too long, the bickering mage clans used him for that which they dared not soil their own hands with.” The Kehjani studied Uldyssian closer. “He is very formidable.”

But speaking of the spellcaster reminded the son of Diomedes of something—or, rather, *someone*—more sinister. “There’re things more formidable than Zorun Tzin.”

“Yes, you, for instance, as you escaped his sanctum so readily.” At that moment, the serving girl returned with the tea and fruit her master had requested. She set both trays on a tiny marble and iron table next to Uldyssian’s chair. “Please. Eat and drink at your convenience.”

Uldyssian did not argue, digging into the fruit and even risking some of the tea. Despite the heat of the region, he expected the tea to be hot. However, Uldyssian found it not only cool but sweet with the

scent of some nectar.

“Taiyan tea,” his host explained. “It will help rejuvenate you.”

As he poured a second cup, Uldyssian said, “What of Zorun Tzin?”

“From all you describe, it sounds as if the mage clans will have to deal with the beast that they themselves loosed upon you. Master Fahin had friends and alliances with many of them. Zorun Tzin will be outcast even from his own blood. You need not concern yourself with him.”

But Uldyssian still recalled the fleeting glimpse. Tzin had followed him through the streets, and the look Uldyssian had read in the mage’s eyes had indicated a hatred for the son of Diomedes that was nearly as deep as that of—

He jerked straight. The cup of tea slipped from his grip. The delicate container shattered on the floor, spilling tea.

“No...”

Prince Ehmada leaned close in concern. “You are ill?”

Uldyssian rose. “Prince, I must speak with the mage clans immediately!”

“And I have begun to send out entreaties to them and the top guilds, my friend. I did so the moment after I’d read Fahin’s messages. It will take a little time—”

But the prince’s guest was only half listening. How could he have not seen it before? Uldyssian berated himself for a fool despite the fact that his powers were only now enabling him to recover from the horrors of the mage’s sanctum. Yes, he had seen the figure of Zorun Tzin in the streets....

But the eyes had been those of Malic.

“You don’t understand, prince!” Uldyssian growled. “There’s a new concern for the mages that they need to know about before he’s got a chance to take over one of them!”

“I must admit, I am at a loss. I have no idea what you are talking about—”

“Neither do we,” came a cultured female voice, “but we are certainly willing to listen...for the moment.”

Both men turned to see a trio of figures who could not have simply walked onto the balcony behind them. Uldyssian took up a defensive stance. He knew what these had to be.

However, Prince Ehmada boldly—or possibly fool-hardily—stepped between his guest and the mages. “Nurzani,” he said to a spindly figure that looked like something Mendeln might have summoned from the ground. “My greetings, Kethuus,” the noble then declared to one who seemed more shadow than man. At last, to the woman who had first spoken, Ehmada finished, “And ever, ever a pleasure, my

beautiful Amolia...”

Unlike most females Uldyssian had thus far seen, Amolia did not react to Ehmada other than to nod slightly. However, as she pulled back the odd, high-peaked hood, Uldyssian nearly let out a gasp, for Amolia was close enough in appearance to Lilith’s guise of Lylia as to be her sister. Clearly, she came from the stock that the demoness had used for her disguise.

She noted his staring, and the flaring of her eyes warned him against any impudent action.

“You are Uldyssian ul-Diomed.”

“I am,” he replied, not relaxing in the least. He stepped around his host. After Fahin, Uldyssian did not want Ehmada also paying a price for his friendship.

But all the woman did was say, “The prince has introduced us.” Her two companions left their own hoods up. “You spoke of the traitor and murderer Zorun Tzin.”

Uldyssian measured each of them but could not decide just who was the most dangerous. “I did. I need to warn the mage clans—”

“You warn us, you warn them. You wish to speak to them, you speak to us.”

This was not how Uldyssian had intended it, but he had no choice. First, the spellcasters had to be warned of the danger in their own midst. That in itself might create an opening he could use to forge some sort of alliance against the Cathedral.

“First, have you found Zorun Tzin?” he asked.

“It should be obvious that we have not.”

“I mean, when was the last time anyone saw him?”

“We saw him last.” Amolia glanced at her two companions, then continued, “Just before he fled to his underground chambers. Something must have happened—and we assume it concerned you.”

“It did, but not as you think. Tzin had a servant, too, the giant.”

“Terul. We saw what was left of him. Your work?”

Uldyssian dared not deny it. “But not for the reason you think. That thing was no longer Terul. I don’t know for how long that was true, but I suspect he’d already possessed the giant when Zorun Tzin chose to slaughter Master Fahin’s personal caravan.”

“You verify it was Zorun who slew all?” asked the one called Nurzani in an incredibly deep voice. “That is what was suspected.”

“Yes, he did it...but there was another who enabled him to do so with such...completeness. It was he who possessed the servant. You know him by the name of Malic.”

Amolia frowned. “As in the high priest of the Order of Mefis? Malic, who is, by our best reckoning, dead?”

The son of Diomedes reluctantly nodded. "Dead...but deadly still."

He explained to them what had happened to Malic and how the priest had been brought back. Uldyssian described his shock when Terul had admitted to being the spirit of the priest come back for vengeance and then his desperate battle to escape the vile specter. He left out only the stone, not certain if it was something that he wished to bring to the attention of the mages.

"And how does this pertain to Zorun Tzin?" the shadow called Kethuus demanded. "You said that you killed the giant."

"I thought I did...but I think Malic still survived in the body long enough. I saw Zorun Tzin in the streets just after the prince found me...only now I think the eyes weren't his."

Nurzani leaned toward Amolia. "Recall the mage's staff lying abandoned as if of no consequence. A priest would not require such."

"Malic's accomplishments were known well to the mage clans," Kethuus interjected, "but to move on from host to host after death, that sounds too incredible!"

Amolia glared at Uldyssian. "It was not the high priest's skills that enabled him first to cheat his doom, but the questionable acts of two brothers...but yes, I think Malic capable of perverting it further still."

"But the bodies don't last," pointed out Uldyssian. "How long Tzin's might, I don't know."

"Zorun Tzin was a spellcaster of exceptional skill and questionable judgment," the female member of the trio stated. "But his physical worthiness would certainly not make him my first choice should I be in such a state as you claim Malic is in."

"I'm making no claim! I'm speaking the truth! If your people find Zorun Tzin, they've got to make certain that they don't touch him." Uldyssian remembered something else. "And watch for black lesions. I think they worsen as the body burns out...."

He expected the three mages to act immediately, but instead, Amolia looked to her two companions. The trio stood in silence, simply eyeing one another.

Then, without a warning, Kethuus vanished.

"Word has gone out concerning your suspicions of Zorun Tzin," Amolia announced. "Now we turn to the question of what to do about you, Uldyssian ul-Diomed." Her gaze narrowed dangerously. "What, indeed..."

And suddenly, an emerald sphere materialized around him.

* * *

This body was not going to last for very long. Malic knew that the

moment he had taken it, but his choices had been very limited at the time. He had managed to linger in the corpse of the giant for far longer than even he had thought possible. Mephisto had surely been smiling on him when the fool spellcaster had reached for the crystal.

That piece remained in his hand, although for what reason, Malic did not yet know. He was not certain that he would have time to use it to amplify his transfer to another host. For that matter, who was to say that his next victim would be one worthy of keeping permanently?

Only Uldyssian thus far matched the criteria.

He kept to the shadows, using what he knew of his own spells to hide him from the inner sight of the mages. It was more difficult to cast properly in this body, for its former occupant had been of a calling using other forces. Given time, Malic supposed that he could have adjusted, but time was not on his side.

He had to find Uldyssian. No other body would suffice.

Malic passed a barrel whose top was covered in moisture. On a dread hunch, the high priest peered as best he could into the water. The image was distorted but still clear enough to reveal a dark spot near his left ear.

"So soon..." he muttered in Zorun Tzin's voice. Malic had barely even worn this body! It had taken two days for the lesions to start on the giant, and Durram's young form had lasted *weeks* before the first had grown evident.

"Time grows shorter with each one," the specter realized. "I must have you soon, Uldyssian."

But first he had to find his quarry and escape a city full of mages who thought him a renegade from their ranks. For that, Malic would need another body already, one that would hold for a time. It would do him little good to switch to a host that would fail him almost immediately.

Then a sudden suspicion made him crouch further into the shadows. A moment later, a cloaked figure stepped into the alley in which he had gone. The figure carried with him a staff, marking him immediately as one of Tzin's fellow mages.

As if to make matters worse, another mage appeared at the opposite end. He, too, wielded a staff. Both men slowly wended their way toward each other, with Malic in the midst.

But hidden in the dark, the undead priest was not concerned. He had seen the trappings of each man and knew exactly what to do. After all, he was still a servant of Mephisto, was he not?

As the pair closed, Malic drew the proper symbols in the air, then thrust a finger at the mage on his left.

At that very moment, his target saw him. Raising the staff to

shoulder level, the spellcaster growled, “Stand there, Zorun Tzin! You are my prisoner!”

Unperturbed, Malic pointed at the second of his pursuers.

That mage also raised his staff. “You presume too much, dog of Harakas! He is mine!”

“Sarandesh pig! Like all your clan, you seek to steal instead of earn your prize!”

They confronted each other as if Malic did not exist. The Harakasian mage thrust one end of his staff at his Sarandeshi counterpart. The latter countered the attack. The two magical staffs clattered together with a flash of unleashed energies.

“Crawl back into your mud hole, Sarandeshi!”

“I’ll wipe such words from your ugly face, Harakasian!”

The Sarandeshi rubbed a glowing rune on his staff. A red aura began to form over his adversary.

The other spellcaster immediately touched one of his own runes. A golden glow formed around the red, devouring it.

The two let out guttural cries and went at each other, using both physical and magical means. They fought like two frenzied cats, nothing existing for them but their mutual hatred.

And as they fought, Malic calmly slipped past them. The power of his master, the Lord of Hate, had once again been proven supreme. His two would-be captors would either slay each other or have to be forced apart by any other mages who found them. Either way, the distraction would serve Malic well.

But he needed to do more. As he slipped from one alley to the next, the spirit considered carefully. The Triune was in ruins; there would be no help from there. His lord Lucion was also no more, a victim of Uldyssian....

From Zorun Tzin’s lips erupted a curse at his own stupidity. He was in *Kehjan*. The capital. He was *not* alone.

The city was the culmination of generation upon generation of building, often over the sites of older structures. The current populace had little, if any, notion about parts of their home’s past. Malic, however, knew much.

The entrance he sought was completely hidden from those who trod upon it. That had been done for aesthetic reasons in part, but also for reasons of safety. The depths below were dark and dangerous and, in places, populated by things undreamed. The underside of Kehjan’s history could be found there in the form of stolen and lost treasures and the bodies of the dead.

It was simple for Malic to locate the hidden lever in the decorative column on the corner of the next alley. The lever, barely an inch long,

creaked with age as it finally moved.

Next to the column, a portion of the street dropped open. Malic leapt down into the hole. Then, when the stone did not move back into place as it was supposed to, he struggled to close the hole again. Zorun Tzin's body made the task more difficult, the mage obviously not as concerned with physical superiority as the high priest had been.

Once Malic had finally sealed the hole again, he climbed down a cracked and ancient set of stone steps into a blackened chamber in which the rush of water could be heard. The small globe of light Malic summoned revealed dark, turbulent waters pouring through a canal as wide as the streets above. The depths of the canal could not be made out, but he knew that a man could disappear below with ease.

Aware that the hunt continued above, Malic scurried along the edge of the canal deeper and deeper into the maze of tunnels. The system ran underneath all of Kehjan but rarely was visited by those above, unless some terrible blockage occurred and water levels rose to threaten the streets. The mage clans would also be loath at first to search for him down here, for different and more deadly reasons.

And it was for one of those reasons that the spirit had ventured into this hellish place.

Rats, serpents, and other vermin fled from the unaccustomed light. Some of the creatures lacked any eyes, generations of breeding in darkness making such features useless.

Something bobbed in the water not far from Malic. He paused to inspect its familiar shape.

The body had been down here for some weeks. Much of the flesh had been nibbled away, but enough remained to keep part of the corpse intact. It had been a man of middle age and, from the looks of his garments, fairly prosperous. A robbery victim, no doubt. There were few who would venture down here, but bandits were among that lot.

In fact, ahead he heard a pair of voices in argument. They spoke with the accents of the low caste, and their argument appeared to concern the division of spoils, in this case a ring and a jeweled broach.

"The ring I'll take," declared one. "I cut it off his finger, so's it's mine!"

"Never so! The broach, it'll be harder to sell! You take it. You said he'd have gold! If'n I can't have gold, I deserve the ring."

Around the corner, an old brass lamp on the ledge illuminated a pair of scruffy figures in beggar's rags. They paused in mid-argument when Malic, his glow light dismissed, appeared.

"Who's this?" growled the one who had cut off the finger of their absent victim. He was short and wiry and, other than some missing

teeth and a few scars, looked in relatively good shape.

His partner, on the other hand, while taller and fuller, clearly suffered the first stages of some disease that would eventually eat away his flesh.

“I want his sandals,” snarled the second, indicating Malic.

The high priest did nothing until they were nearly upon him. Then, with one hand, he slammed his stiff fingers into the throat of the larger bandit, while with the other, he seized the wiry one by the chest.

The taller thief fell back against the mossy wall, clutching his ruined windpipe. His partner stood frozen, caught by Malic’s magic.

The spirit reached into a pouch and removed the bit of crystal. He thrust it into one open hand of the thief, then closed the fingers. Malic then thrust his will into the man before him—

And suddenly, he stared out of different eyes at the slack-faced figure of Zorun Tzin.

The mage slumped into his arms. Malic let Zorun fall from him into the dark water. The dull splash echoed through the ancient tunnels.

Next to him, the second bandit struggled to breathe. He stared at what he thought was his partner and reached out a hand for help.

Malic pressed him against the wall with a strength inhuman. He pulled from his new host’s waist a dagger.

“Not fit for me,” the spirit whispered to the choking, frightened man, “but fit enough for what I seek.”

He brought the dagger up and, as the bandit squirmed, cut a simple, shallow pattern over the chest. Streaks of blood dripped down.

When that was accomplished, Malic placed the blade in his teeth, then reversed his grip so that he could now set the fragment directly in the center of his design.

The other bandit grew more frantic. His struggles intensified, nearly causing Malic to lose the crystal. The spirit grew incensed. He forced his victim to look straight into his eyes.

Caught by those eyes, the thief froze. Malic began muttering under his breath.

A slight bubbling sound caught his attention. He kept his gaze on the bloody pattern but spoke faster.

The bubbling suddenly intensified. It was now not far from him. Out of the corner of his new eye, Malic glanced toward where Zorun Tzin’s corpse floated.

The body bobbed up and down—then, with a swooshing sound, it vanished beneath the surface.

Malic went back to his chanting. The tunnel had suddenly grown quite cold. In the dim lamplight, both his breath and that of the

hapless bandit could be seen.

Something erupted from the black waters, rising well above Malic's back.

Without the least sign of concern, the spirit turned around. Behind him loomed a bone-white thing that resembled some of the jellyfish of the inner sea. Yet this apparition was several times his size, and in the center of the translucent mass, two pale, bulbous orbs fixed on the puny human figures.

A forest of leafy tentacles hung under the fiend, each one arrayed with serrated edges. Fragments of meat and other grisly objects hung from many of the appendages, but they were not nearly so horrific a sight as within the boneless mound that was the creature's body. In there, already dissolving, was the carcass that had once been Zorun Tzin.

In addition to droplets of water, other things fell from the monstrous creature, inedible bits of the mage's clothing.

Malic faced the beast. "You understand the hidden tongue, demon! You answered it."

A thick bubbling sound escaped the fiend.

"My master is Mephisto, brother to your master...Diablo...."

Again, the demon bubbled. By this point, there was hardly anything left of the dead mage save a few bone fragments, including the skull.

"By the pact of the Three, you must bow to my power. You must obey my will! Understand?"

Some of the leafy appendages moved. Malic recognized this as an affirmative response. He smiled.

"You must have a better sacrifice, though. That is also agreed upon by the pact. A living sacrifice, not that sorry appetizer you just swallowed."

The hundreds of appendages shook more vehemently.

"He is yours," Malic said, stepping aside.

The demon's limbs sought the remaining thief. Malic waited until the first had seized the man, then released his hold.

Suddenly granted the ability to move, the cutthroat screamed and tried to pull himself free. He might as well have been a fly caught in a web, though. His struggles only served to tangle him more, and the serrated edges of the demon's appendages cut into his flesh with ease.

Malic watched with patience as the beast's victim was drawn up shrieking into the gelatinous cavity. Within, a thick liquid swept over the unfortunate thief. Despite his damaged throat, his screams continued for several seconds. Then, even as his skin started to slough away, he finally stilled.

As the demon began the process of digesting its latest meal, Malic

spoke to it again.

“Now you are truly bound. Your magic is mine. First, you will give me the power to keep this body longer than the last.” He did not have to explain what he meant by that, for the demon saw him for what he truly was. “That will buy me time.”

The creature waved its appendages, signaling acknowledgment.

With a smile worthy of his old self, Malic went on. “Then we shall begin the process of finding again one Uldyssian ul-Diomed.”

Nine

Furious at the mages' duplicity, the son of Diomedes glared. Struck by his will, the emerald sphere shattered easily. Uldyssian stepped out of its wreckage to confront the two remaining mages.

Amolia's eyes widened perceptively. Kethuus grunted in what sounded like admiration.

"Is this all there is in Kehjan?" the son of Diomedes angrily demanded. "Deception and betrayal?"

Kethuus gestured. What seemed like frost settled over Uldyssian's shoulders, then turned into something harder than rock.

But even that was not enough. His fury mounting, Uldyssian shrugged.

Amplified by his power, the shrug easily sent the frost flying.

"Stop this!" ordered Prince Ehmad to all of them. "Stop this now!"

To Uldyssian's surprise, the mages stilled.

The prince stepped around until once more he stood between the two parties. He glared at the mages especially.

"The palace has been dictated to be neutral ground, my dear Amolia," the young noble said pointedly. "No mage shall cast upon another mage. You've violated seven wards by attacking him."

"He is not of the mage clans," the blond enchantress replied. "The covenant does not cover him."

"Are you certain?"

Amolia glanced back at Kethuus, who cocked his head. The pair did not respond further to the prince, but neither did they follow up on their attacks.

Ehmad turned to Uldyssian. "Please forgive what happened, Master Uldyssian. It was an error of judgment."

Uldyssian did not see it that way, but for Prince Ehmad's sake, he nodded.

To the female spellcaster, the prince continued, "He wishes to speak to the mage council and the leading guilds. Is that not so, Uldyssian?"

"Yes."

"Amolia, would it not make for simpler conversation and likely more coherent answers if Uldyssian stood before both of his own free will?"

From the woman, Ehmad received only a curt nod.

“I would recommend that you arrange it, at least with the mage clans. I know whom to speak with concerning the guilds. Uldyssian can talk to both at the same time, so no one’s feelings are hurt.”

Kethuus let out a slight snicker at this last comment, a snicker that vanished quickly the moment Amolia glared at him.

Pretending not to have noticed the incident, Prince Ehmad went on, “And as Master Fahin did before me, I place myself as Uldyssian’s sponsor in this, with all the protections my name gives.”

“Are you sure that will be enough?” the woman muttered.

“I think that’s all there is to say,” the prince concluded, folding his arms.

Kethuus stiffened. Even though she did not face him, Amolia appeared to sense the change.

“They thought they had him,” the shadowy mage announced, his eyes staring off. “But the rat slipped through the trap!”

“They found him that quickly?” asked Uldyssian, impressed despite mention of the escape.

“No renegade mage can hide from the clans in this city,” Amolia explained with some arrogance. “All spellcasters have agreed to leave a small piece of their essence that is hidden away until such an occasion occurs. It did so now with Zorun Tzin as it has with others in the past.”

“That sounds very risky to all mages, especially if one of the council decides he wants Kehjan for himself.”

“It requires three-fourths of the council to open the way to where what we gave is secreted. There is no chance for catastrophe or betrayal.”

Uldyssian was not about to argue, but he felt that the spellcasters trusted in themselves too much, especially considering the feuds that had been going on. Worse, now that he had nearly been caught while in Tzin’s body, Malic would surely seek another, and very likely that one would *not* be one of Amolia’s ilk.

“We will see what the council desires,” she finally agreed. “But do not be surprised if they reject hearing a farmer speak to them about what they should and should not do with their training and skills.”

“That isn’t what I plan,” Uldyssian snarled.

Neither Amolia nor Kethuus replied to that. Instead, the pair stood side-by-side...and then vanished.

With their departure, Prince Ehmad let out an exhalation of relief. “Thank goodness! I feared that if you and they continued fighting, this entire balcony might go.”

“I’m sorry for my part.”

Uldyssian’s host waved off his apologies. “Conclude this matter

with the clans and the guilds without more chaos and bloodshed. That is all I ask of you, Ascenian.”

The son of Diomedes nodded. “And that’s all I want.”

But as night fell, there came neither word concerning Zorun Tzin nor any gathering before the mage clans. Prince Ehmada assured Uldyssian that the latter simply had to do with the usual bickering between the spellcasters about how best to arrange matters.

“They will argue this point or that point and eventually come to the same conclusion that they would have if they had not argued at all. It is the same with the guilds, of whom I am also awaiting word still.”

The hunt for Uldyssian’s former captor continued to result in nothing. Since the one sighting early on, Tzin—or Malic, rather—had utterly vanished. To Uldyssian, that meant that the high priest probably had already taken another host. He could now be *anyone*.

Explaining this to the prince was simple enough; knowing what to do about it was another thing. Ehmada assured him that he would pass this on to Amolia and the others, but to Uldyssian, that was not enough. Malic would come for him again, of that he was certain...and that meant that anyone in the fiendish spirit’s path might become a victim.

Ehmada refused Uldyssian’s suggestion that the son of Diomedes should find shelter elsewhere. “First, unless this dread shade knew that you had left here, he would still attempt to infiltrate the palace. Second, if you leave the palace, the mage clans may use that as an excuse to say that you are no longer under my protection. They are opportunistic like that, Master Uldyssian.”

“You make me wonder if it’s worth dealing with them at all. You make me wonder if there’s any room for trusting them.”

“Oh, there is. When they swear to an oath, they will keep it. You must just be certain of the wording.”

Ehmada left Uldyssian with that less-than-encouraging thought. The prince had provided him with a sumptuous room the likes of which the former farmer had not experienced even as the guest of Ethon of Partha. The plush, rounded bed—much softer than he was used to—had a high, richly woven canopy upon which the beautiful aspects of the jungle had been set. Various animals and flora were intertwined in images that proved restful, not jarring, as Uldyssian first thought. Two golden lances, crossed at their centers, occupied each corner.

The entire motif of the room was typical of what, as a simple villager, Uldyssian would have found garish. The brilliant reds, oranges, and golds were a sharp contrast to the forest colors that one

found in a farmer's abode. Uldyssian's people had never had much opportunity to adorn their homes so; they were too busy trying to earn a living from the soil.

On his right, there were two large filigreed windows facing the northern end of the city. A gauzy curtain likely made of silk subdued most of the light from without. Uldyssian had quickly learned that the capital never completely slept; there was always something going on. He marveled that people could go about their lives, especially considering the monumental and deadly events of which he was not only a part but a major cause.

His thoughts returned to Mendeln, Serenthia, and the others. For some reason, as the day had progressed, Uldyssian had grown more and more concerned about them. It was as if something was wrong, but what that was, he could not say. He was afraid of actually reaching out to them, for fear that if all was as he had left it, they would suddenly grow more disturbed themselves over his safety. Uldyssian did not want the edyrem acting hastily. Anything that eliminated his chances of garnering the mage clans' and the guilds' support against the Cathedral meant calamity.

But a sense of uneasiness continued to grow within him. After some debate, Uldyssian decided to try to reach out to Serenthia alone. He would do his best to reassure her quickly that all was well. There was no need to worry her about Malic's return, at least for now.

But as he started to call to her, one of the lights outside grew more distracting. No matter which direction Uldyssian turned, it seemed that either the light or its reflection caught his eye.

The solution to his problem was simple enough. Rising, Uldyssian sought a thicker set of curtains flanking each window. He started to draw one across—and then halted. Uldyssian stared at the distant light, trying to identify where it came from. It was far, far away, well beyond where he would have expected it. It almost seemed beyond the city walls, but what so distant from the palace would still be so bright?

Then what sounded like a low growl made him jump. Uldyssian glanced behind but saw nothing. He stood there, poised to defend himself, and finally decided that he had imagined things.

Exhaustion seized him. Abandoning any interest in the light, Serenthia, everything, the son of Diomedes stumbled to the bed. He threw himself on it, then rolled onto his back. Desiring nothing more than sleep, Uldyssian stared up at the comforting patterns in the canopy.

Serenthia and the edyrem came to mind again. Feeling guilty, Uldyssian struggled back to consciousness and tried again to focus on her. Staring up at the canopy, he imagined the jungle there as the

same one where she and his brother could be found.

As his focus increased, the imagery above him was defined, becoming almost real. He could hear the jungle sounds and imagined some of the animals actually being there at that very moment. Uldyssian heard their cries. He saw himself in the jungle, not far from his followers.

Somewhere along the way, his eyes closed—and then snapped open as a thick, feline growl erupted.

Uldyssian was surrounded by jungle, but not that through which he had so long trekked. Instead, he was in the midst of a strange, brightly colored jungle. The trees had an odd uniformity, especially the leaves. There was no discernible source of illumination, but he could see as if it were daytime.

And what he saw next was a huge, shimmering cat leaping at him.

Uldyssian gestured, but his powers seemed muted. He managed to shove the cat to the side but did not send it flying away as he had hoped.

Another growl arose from his left. Uldyssian barely had time to throw himself to the side as a second cat lunged.

Both predators immediately turned back. Uldyssian tried to summon a ball of fire, but nothing happened. He was forced to push back through the odd vegetation in order to avoid the sharp claws and teeth.

But barely had he moved into the brush when a massive, armored beast with two long horns on its snout nearly ran him down from behind. Momentum sent it barreling along toward the cats, which leapt out of its way.

And as the larger beast slowed, Uldyssian stared at it. That it shimmered like the cats did not surprise him as much as that it was *exactly* the same strange coloring. Both it and the cats were gold with a dotted orange line on the edges and uniform red, leaf-shaped marks along the sides of their torsos.

But his inspection was put to an abrupt end as the first of the cats jumped at him again. Unable to avoid it this time, Uldyssian braced himself for the collision.

The cat proved oddly light when it struck, but still the pair went tumbling back. The teeth snapped within inches of his face. Uldyssian, who had grown up around so many different animals, discovered something else disconcerting then.

The cat did not breathe. There was not the slightest exhalation, nor was there even any of the stench that he would have expected from an animal, especially a predator.

Claws tore at his chest. Uldyssian let out a gasp of pain. Something

poured forth from his wounds, odd ribbons that looked like cloth parodies of blood.

And then the son of Diomedes recognized where he was, even as he managed to throw the cat to the side. His fears were verified when he glanced up and around and saw only the same odd leaves and trees. There was no sky. One did not exist here.

He was in the tapestry.

How that had happened, Uldyssian had no time to wonder, for the second cat and the horned beast were upon him. Aware of the unnatural lightness of his inhuman foes, he kicked hard at the fanged feline, then jumped over the armored beast.

A shadow dropped upon him. Talons raked his cheek. A raptor with similar markings to the other creatures flew past. It was nearly as large as the cats. As it circled to attack a second time, Uldyssian nearly tripped into the jaws of one of the sinister river reptiles he and his friends had first encountered when entering the jungle lands. A mouth filled with teeth sought his leg, and although the human suspected the creature of not having a true gullet, he had no intention of finding out otherwise. Uldyssian managed to roll just out of reach of the snapping jaws.

More animal cries filled his ears. From all over, the beasts in the tapestry were converging upon him. In addition to those he already faced, Uldyssian saw long, wicked serpents, savage primates as huge as men, and antelopes with spiraling horns.

He also saw something else. His only hope. He ran as quickly as he could, struggling past a hissing serpent and kicking at another of the reptiles.

There! They stood just as he recalled them. Lengthy golden spears. Uldyssian had barely seized one before another raptor dove down at him. He rewarded the creature for its efforts with a thrust of the spear that skewered the avian in descent. The bird let out a squawk, then died.

Shaking the carcass free, Uldyssian spun around to face the next nearest animal. The cat about to attack suddenly pulled back, spitting. The armored beast behind it did not slow, though. Undaunted by the spear, it tried to trample the human.

But Uldyssian used the spear to help him vault onto the creature. As it raised its head toward him, he plunged the weapon into its unprotected head.

Snorting, the behemoth dropped like a rock. But in doing so, it ripped the spear from Uldyssian's grip.

He had no choice but to throw himself toward the other, which still hung at an angle where he had left it.

A thick hand grabbed his arm just before the son of Diomedes could reach his goal. A hirsute countenance that was a parody of a man's filled his view.

The giant primate wrapped his huge limbs around Uldyssian and squeezed. He gasped as the air was crushed out of him.

This is not real! Uldyssian insisted. *I'm not trapped in the tapestry!*

Yet how could he be certain that he was not? Everything around him indicated that he was.

But whether or not that was the case, Uldyssian was positive that his powers should have remained his. There was no conceivable reason they should be of so little use.

He tried to think of something simple but effective. As earlier, fire was the first thing that came to him. Yet the last time, he had failed to create so much as a spark.

What other choice did he have, though? Uldyssian concentrated harder than ever. Fire. He wanted fire....

And suddenly, the nearby jungle burst into flames.

It was not a fire like Uldyssian would have expected. Its flames did not blacken the trees and undergrowth—it burned *holes* in them the way it might fabrics.

The creatures attacking him reacted as animals would by fleeing in panic. However, those caught in the immediate conflagration perished in the same odd manner as the jungle itself. Holes burned into them, and perhaps the most disquieting thing about that was that the animals continued to run until they had no more legs or body. Only then were they truly “dead.”

Although serving to frighten off Uldyssian's bestial foes, the flames created a new threat. They were rapidly eating away at the surreal jungle, leaving little avenue for him to escape...if escape was at all possible.

Uldyssian did not give up hope, though. Satisfied that his powers were indeed his own once more, he focused on his room. Somehow he was certain that he was still in the room, that this jungle was all illusion. If there was a threat, it lay there, not here. The only threat here was the fire, and that was his creation, his to control.

And as he thought this, the flames held back. At the same time, the tapestry jungle lost substance and receded. Although pleased by his success, Uldyssian focused harder, certain that he was in danger in the true world.

Without warning, Uldyssian found himself standing at the window, one hand still on the curtain that he had been moving to block the piercing light. He realized that his eyes gazed without blinking directly into that light.

He also knew that he was not alone in the chamber.

Uldyssian threw himself to the side as a shadow coalesced into a man as tall as him and more powerfully built. Of the face, he could make out nothing, for although the figure moved past the illumination, shadow remained over his features.

Then Uldyssian saw the two curved knives, each almost a foot long. They glinted quite well in the light from outside, and their use was obvious. Uldyssian's mysterious attacker slashed over and over, each blade taking its turn.

Raising a fist, Uldyssian imagined a ball of energy. It materialized, then flew without hesitation at his adversary.

A moment later, it scattered in all directions, becoming a rain of sparkling lights that evaporated without any effect.

His failure received a harsh laugh from the assassin. He thrust down with one knife. Uldyssian, startled by the protections surrounding the other, failed to stop the blade.

The knife's edge cut through his garment, then drew a horrific red line down his torso. Uldyssian grunted. He managed to stagger out of reach, but when he sought to heal the wound, it resisted.

"Heretic!" rumbled the shadowed figure. "Your demon-spawned magic is nothing to his glorious power!"

Those words were more than enough to tell Uldyssian just who guided this astounding attack. Inarius had planned well.

Uldyssian knew that he could use his abilities to bring down the palace without harming himself, but he could scarcely protect anyone else, including Prince Ehmadi. He had no doubt that Inarius had concluded that same thing; the angel had tied his rival's hands. His assassin was well protected, and the Prophet had already proven to Uldyssian that his power far outshone the mortal's.

Or did it? As the assassin sought to corner the son of Diomedes, Uldyssian wondered why, then, had Inarius sent this servant rather than return himself? Did he consider Uldyssian so beneath him that he need not bother with the human personally? That seemed doubtful, for what shielded the faceless man surely had to be the angel. Inarius was staying far away from the struggle yet guiding it.

Why? Why not simply crush Uldyssian to a pulp?

Was it...could it be because the angel could not so easily do that?

His back collided with a wall. While he had been considering the possibilities, his well-trained foe had managed finally to steer him to where he wanted him.

The blades came from both directions, each arcing in such a manner as to make it impossible to keep an eye on both. Uldyssian thrust out an arm to block the one he thought more deadly—and the

assassin plunged the second into his stomach.

He let out a moan as the knife sank deep. A triumphant chuckle escaped the shadowed man.

“Blessed Prophet!” the figure gloated. “The heretic is dead!”

His attacker spoke true. Uldyssian felt the unmistakable cold spreading through him. He had sorely underestimated the angel.

But despite the bitter certainty of his death, Uldyssian fought back the horrific cold, fought against it...and *won*. It receded from his body into his hands, where it stayed. Life rushed through Uldyssian once more, but he continued to hunch over, letting the assassin think that his target was about to collapse.

The shadowed man leaned close, the knives held ready for what would merely be excessive butchery on his part. With the blow he had struck, there was no reason to attack again. Yet still the assassin looked eager to bury the blades in his victim. He raised them high—

Uldyssian took the coldness of death, Inarius’s gift to him, and, planting both hands against the chest of the startled slayer, sent that eternal chill into his foe.

The assassin let out a garbled cry as his victim’s death instead flowed through him. The knives dropped from his hands, clattering onto the floor. He clutched his torso exactly where he had stabbed Uldyssian.

The son of Diomedes felt the last of the cold leave his fingertips. He pulled away from the shadowed man. Letting one of his hands graze his wound, Uldyssian discovered that it had finally healed.

Weaving, the assassin stumbled against the curtain. He turned toward the light.

“Great Prophet, G-Gamuel has f-failed you! F-forgive me, please!”

It occurred to Uldyssian only then that there might be something about Inarius that he could learn from this special servant. He reached for the one who called himself Gamuel, but at that moment, the same light again caught his eye.

This time, though, it blinded Uldyssian so much that he faltered. His gaze turned from Gamuel and the window.

There was a sudden, harsh wind. The curtain shifted, and the light no longer blinded him. He reached again for the assassin—

No one was there.

Rushing to the window, Uldyssian looked out. His eyes immediately went to the area below his room. However, there was no hint whatsoever that the zealous Gamuel had chosen to finish his fading life by flinging himself to his death. The guards down at the palace steps stood at attention as if nothing had disturbed them for hours.

Uldyssian’s legs wavered. He returned to the bed, where he

thoroughly inspected the canopy. As he suspected, it was not in the least burned. There was, in fact, nothing in the room at all to indicate that there had even been an attack, much less that Uldyssian had slain the would-be assassin. Part of the carpet surrounding the bed had been kicked up, and there was the cut in his garment, but neither was sufficient proof of what had just happened.

But though there was not even a scar on his body to attest to events, he knew he had not imagined the struggle. He just could not prove it to the mage clans. He could not prove it even to Prince Ehmada, who might have actually believed his story.

His attention returned to the window. The light that had so harried him earlier was still there, albeit much dimmer. He now knew exactly what it was and where it was located. Uldyssian's room did face north, after all.

North...the direction to the Cathedral of Light.

The body lay before the Prophet just as it had come to him through his spell. Gamuel had died before he could even utter an apology to his master's face. Oddly, the mercenary-turned-priest-turned-assassin had not been killed. What he had suffered was actually not only far more complex than that but something that even Inarius could not recall ever seeing in all his centuries.

Gamuel had not suffered his own death...but rather Uldyssian's.

Impossible as it seemed even to an angel, Uldyssian, who should have died from the wound he had taken, had instead passed that death on to his killer. He had thrust his *dying* into Gamuel, who, unable to do anything else, had been forced to accept it.

Inarius frowned. The reason for his frown had as much to do with the cause of Gamuel's doom as the servant's inadequacy. Lilith's pawn had done the unthinkable. That meant that Inarius would have to alter his entire strategy. The danger he had always believed the nephalem—or edyrem, as these called themselves—to be had come to pass.

THEN...IF I MUST RAZE SANCTUARY TO PUT AN END TO THIS ABOMINATION...SO BE IT.

In an unaccustomed display of anger, the angel waved his hand at the body.

Gamuel's corpse turned as white as marble, then crumbled to ash that blew away despite there being no wind.

Inarius turned from the spot, his failed assassin already forgotten.

SO BE IT, he repeated coldly. *SO BE IT.*

Ten

They would reach the walls of Kehjan come the next day, and yet neither Serenthia nor the other edyrem could sense, much less contact, Uldyssian. Mendeln, who shared a different sort of link with his brother, thought that he could vaguely note Uldyssian's presence in the city, but that was the extent of it.

He had a theory on that troublesome point, and it focused on the mage clans. They considered the capital their domain, and the closer Mendeln got to it, the more he felt the saturation of magical energies that had built up over generations. There were spells upon spells, and many of them had likely been designed not only to shield the work of the mages from one another but also to keep the prying eyes of the Cathedral and the Triune from learning too much. How successful the spellcasters had been in doing that last was debatable, but they were certainly causing consternation among the edyrem. Many feared that their leader was either captured or dead, and neither he nor Serenthia could prove otherwise.

More and more, it appeared likely that Uldyssian's army would attack the capital if they reached the gates without learning anything contrary about his fate.

Mendeln did not even want to imagine the bloodshed should that happen. Caught between the edyrem and the mages, the innocents would surely die by the hundreds.

But there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

The nearby villages had again emptied out in advance of their coming. The shells that had once been homes seemed more eerie to Mendeln than a graveyard, for they were supposed to be inhabited with life. This was all wrong....

There were soldiers farther ahead, most of them hiding in preparation for the assault that they thought would come tomorrow. As many as Mendeln sensed there were ahead, they were not nearly enough even to *slow* the edyrem. What magic he could sense among the city's protectors was minimal.

Serenthia sought to maintain order over the edyrem, but even with the aid of Saron and Jonas, it was becoming more and more difficult. Aware that his own presence would be more detrimental than helpful, Mendeln had finally slipped away from the throngs and entered the nearest village. He knew that he should not have separated from the

others, but it was always easier for him to think in solitude. It was not as if he were alone, either, for there were always a few shades trailing him, in this case random deaths from the vicinity of the capital. He had already questioned them and learned nothing of value. They were all simple people who had worked hard just to stay alive for as long as they had.

Undisturbed by the night, Mendeln wandered from one empty house to another. He did little more than peer through the occasional window. It was not that he was interested in the lives the locals had led, but he missed his own past.

That made him smirk at himself. There had been many times in Seram when Mendeln had dreamed of becoming more than a farmer, many times when he had wished to travel to the exotic places on the maps and charts Master Cyrus had often let him peruse.

His boot kicked up something. It rolled a few yards from him. Mildly curious, Mendeln retrieved it. A girl's doll. It had dark hair and was dyed a deep brown, no doubt so that it would resemble its owner. He thought of his youngest sister, dead these many years from plague. There had been times since Mendeln had learned his skills that he wondered if it was possible to summon her spirit. Each time the notion had occurred to him, though, revulsion had immediately followed. She was dead. His parents were dead. He wished them to remain at peace.

He did not wish them to know what he and Uldyssian had become.

Mendeln put the doll back where he had found it, in the hopes that, should violence somehow be avoided, the child who had lost the toy would someday be reunited with it. However, as he straightened, Mendeln sensed that he was not alone. He glanced among the empty homes...and saw Achilios, notched bow in his hands, stare back at him.

Uldyssian's brother reacted instinctively. The ivory dagger came out with a swiftness that apparently caught even the undead hunter unaware. Mendeln muttered some of the words Rathma had taught him.

Achilios leapt into the shadows just before a series of toothy missiles struck where he had been standing. Mendeln cursed, then barreled his way into the nearest house. He sent the ghosts flanking him out into the village to locate Achilios's position.

But as they left, the archer saved him part of that trouble.

"I mean...no...harm...Mendeln," rasped Achilios from what seemed the other side of the wall against which Uldyssian's brother leaned. "Come out...and we'll...talk."

Inverting the dagger, Mendeln whispered another spell.

Before he could complete it, something shot just past his ear. It struck a wooden beam in another wall with a resounding *thunk*.

The arrow had come through a window only a few feet from Mendeln. Uldyssian's brother dropped to the dirt floor, then moved toward the back of the building. As he did, he began a different spell.

The front wall—including the window through which Achilios had fired—exploded outward.

From beyond the explosion came a growl and a curse. At the same time, Mendeln burst through the back door and out into the nearby jungle. Two ghosts, a young man stricken with pox and an older woman who had perished of a weak heart, needlessly informed him that Achilios had not been brought down by the explosion.

As he caught his breath, Mendeln cursed his own hesitation. There were spells he knew that were far more effective in permanently dealing with something like his former friend. Yet the black-robed figure could not bring himself to speak them. This was *Achilios*, after all, and even though the archer hunted him with the obvious intention of slaying Uldyssian's brother, Mendeln held out some vague hope of freeing the undead.

A noble thought...and one that was certain to get the younger son of Diomedes killed.

Another ghost, a comely noblewoman who had taken poison rather than continue her arranged marriage to a much older and somewhat violent man, materialized just in time to point out the direction from which Achilios was coming. Mendeln tumbled into the thick underbrush behind the wooden house, and although he did not hear the hunter's pursuit, he knew that his former friend was not far behind.

Indeed, not a breath later came the familiar gasping voice. "Mendeln...I come to...talk...there is no...no need for this! Let us both step out—"

In response, Mendeln drew a pattern in the air, then directed it toward Achilios's voice.

"By the...stars!" grated the archer from where he hid. At the same time, there was a rumbling sound, as if a small quake had begun.

Although unable to see the results of his spell, Uldyssian's brother could imagine them. The ground around the undead Achilios should have risen up, seeking to engulf him and thus return him to the grave. It was a spell that Mendeln himself had created based on something Trag'Oul had shown him. Mendeln was sickened by the notion of doing such a thing to his old friend, but he dared not give Achilios the opportunity to fire a second time.

As the churning of dirt continued, Mendeln ran toward the distant

encampment. He did not like taking the chance of drawing Achilios back to Serenthia, but the hunter was less likely to try that attack again...or so he hoped. In truth, Mendeln was at a loss for exactly the best option. He only knew that he had to keep moving.

That point was made particularly well a moment later, as a second bolt cut past his arm. Not only did it sink into the trunk of a nearby tree, but when Mendeln felt his arm, he discovered that the arrow had ripped open the fabric. Another half inch, and the head would have been buried in his arm.

That made him think of Serenthia again and what might happen should Achilios decide that he had to try to slay her once more. That the archer had escaped so readily Mendeln's last spell spoke of the powerful force behind him.

Against an angel, Mendeln very much doubted his chances, but he decided that he was willing to take the risk rather than put the merchant's daughter in more danger. Gritting his teeth, the son of Diomedes veered off into the thicker areas of the jungle. The wild might be Achilios's domain, but the dark was Mendeln's.

He went several yards farther away from both the village and the encampment, then pressed himself against a wide tree. Clutching the dagger against his breast, he started molding a spell to his specifications. Despite his care for Achilios, Mendeln forced himself to see the hunter as what he was: a walking corpse. There were spells that could animate such; Mendeln had used them against Inarius's innocent dupes. To stop animating those, he had merely ceased his incantation. For a thing like Achilios, though, Uldyssian's brother hoped that by actually *reversing* the animation spell, he would send the archer back to the afterdeath.

In theory, it should work. In reality...

He sensed rather than heard Achilios approach. Mendeln was struck by the utter silence with which his friend moved. Even as good as he had been in life, surely then Achilios had made some slight noise, especially the intake of breath.

Mendeln finished assembling his spell. He would have one chance, and one chance only, to use it. It would require him stepping out to face the hunter, but Mendeln was willing to chance that. This had to end. Achilios had twice missed slaying his targets, but it was doubtful that he would keep missing. His master would not permit that.

For Serenthia and Uldyssian—assuming that his brother still lived—to survive, Achilios had to die...again.

I raised you from the ground, and to the ground I will send you again... and may you forgive me for both!

There was something to his right. He noticed only now that none of

the ghosts was nearby to help warn him. Achilios's master wanted no failure this time.

A shadow broke from the darkness.

Mendeln stepped away from the tree, thrusting the downturned dagger toward that shadow. In its pale light, he saw Achilios's grit-covered face. The archer's expression was passive...lifeless.

And much to Mendeln's dismay, Achilios had just finished firing at him.

Mendeln knew he was dead. This close, even a fair archer could not fail to hit him directly in the heart. Despite that, the black-clad figure tried to call out what he could of his spell. It was for his brother's and Serenthia's sake, for it was already too late for him.

The bolt cut past his throat, scarring the neck and continuing on. Mendeln faltered in mid-word as he grasped at the stinging but shallow wound.

Behind him, the arrow hit the tree he had just abandoned.

Achilios lowered his bow. "You should be...slain...you know that."

His declaration caused Mendeln to hesitate. What the hunter said was true. Uldyssian's insistence that Achilios had meant to miss came back to the younger brother. Mendeln had wanted to believe then, but the near killing of Serenthia, with its more questionable intentions, had made him think twice. And when Achilios had come for *him*, then surely it meant that there would be no third reprieve.

Yet there had been, and Achilios himself was able to point that out.

"I find it hard to believe," he dared at last reply, "that you would spend so much time not quite slaying your targets."

This earned him a dry chuckle from the undead figure. "It was by sheer will...and not a little...luck the first time. Even more so...with...with her." If the blond archer could have shed a tear when speaking of Serenthia, he surely would have now. "And you...you only required three...three shots because you're...so damned *obstinate*, Mendeln."

"What do you mean?" It was proving harder and harder for Mendeln to bring himself to start over his dark spell. If not for the raspy voice, the hints of dirt that he could see on the face, and the knowledge that under the collar that covered Achilios's throat was a gaping hole, the son of Diomedes would have felt as if he and the archer were just having one of the many talks they had had as youths.

"I came...to talk. You made that...very difficult. I finally fired...fired the one shot...to show you that if I wanted...to kill you...I could. You didn't pay it...any...mind at all."

"There were circumstances, as you might recall. The last two times you appeared, you tried to put arrows into Uldyssian and her. I remained unconvinced that anything had changed."

The archer shook his head, unveiling part of his gaping throat wound in the process. "And so...I fired a second...a second time...to prove again...that...I could've killed you...or at least wounded...wounded you...if I'd wanted to."

Mendeln lowered the dagger. "Not yet convincing enough, I would have to say."

"No...apparently not." Achilles's expression suddenly tightened. "You...you tried to...to *bury* me...Mendeln. There was...was a moment then...that I wanted to...kill you."

The dagger came back up. "And now?"

"It was...it was only...for a moment...and I still...I still wouldn't have...done it."

There was something so believable in his voice that Mendeln finally put away the dagger. "Did you escape? Is that why you are back now?"

"No...I didn't...escape. He...he changed his...mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I was...I was to kill you all...especially Uldyssian and...and Serenthia...because of what...what you were becoming."

This was already obvious to Mendeln. "And so?"

"Now...now he wishes...wishes otherwise."

"Wishes otherwise? I am not certain that fills me with trust! And who is *he*, exactly, Achilles? Other than an *angel*, I mean!"

"Someone who might be...our only hope...against Inarius," the undead archer replied. His gaze suddenly shifted past Mendeln, who felt the hair on his neck rise. "The only hope."

IF IT IS STILL POSSIBLE... came a voice that sounded too much like that of Inarius. *FOR IT SEEMS THAT ONE OF THE THREE HAS NOW ENTERED THIS WORLD.*

Spinning around, Mendeln faced the angel. It was not Inarius, of that he was somehow certain. There was so much that reminded him exactly of Rathma's father, yet he knew somehow that this was not him.

But more important was what the celestial being had just said. "One of the Three?" Uldyssian's brother blurted. His mind raced. The only "Three" that he could think of were the patron spirits of the Triune, spirits who were, in fact, actually—"No!" Mendeln vehemently shook his head. "You cannot mean—"

The faceless figure gave an almost imperceptible nod. *YES, ONE OF THE DEMON LORDS HAS COME TO SANCTUARY.*

This was not how it was supposed to be. From time immemorial, all

had proceeded as Inarius intended. Whenever some slight trouble had reared its head, the angel had attended to it with a draconian efficiency that would have left even his brethren reeling. He had learned from that one foolish error, learned from falling prey to his lover's false words. Since that distasteful event, Inarius had never let anything go beyond his immediate control.

Until now.

The angel, still in the guise of the Prophet, stalked his sanctum as his emotions grew unchecked. Uncertainties that he had not experienced in centuries seized hold of him.

Oris had come in search of her counterpart, who she did not know was no longer even dust on the floor. Inarius had granted her no more than a minute with him but had paid her words little attention during that period. His blunt comment that Gamuel was to be forgotten left her pale, but he did not care. Human concerns were trivial compared with his own.

The night had grown old by this point, and although he was eternal, the passing of the last few hours only served to make the Prophet more anxious. In the past, there had never been a situation that had required more than a few moments' consideration on his part. Now his mind could not function, save to repeat over and over his recent failures.

THERE HAS BEEN A MISTAKE! he insisted to himself. *THERE HAS BEEN A MISTAKE! A FAULT NOT MINE!*

The mortal Uldyssian had dealt with the Triune, just as Inarius had wanted. The next step should have been the simple downfall of the angel's pawn. Inarius's agents had turned so many people against the edyrem that in the end, the abominations would surely fall.

But Uldyssian himself could not be stopped...and he was coming for Inarius...coming for him...

Glancing up at the glorious panorama that sought, in a feeble manner, to describe the perfection of the High Heavens, the angel started. He could have sworn that one of the figures had moved. Inarius stepped back, studying the painted form.

No, it could not have moved. It had only been his own imagination

The face of the Prophet twisted in fury. His fears melted away at the same time, melted away with little difficulty, for they were not exactly his own.

"I know you now," he declared to the empty chamber in his human voice. "Your little games will not work on me, demon! You forget with whom you deal!"

I deal with a traitor, a liar, and a murderer, said a voice that, despite

Inarius's claim, sent a slight chill through him. *It's almost like dealing with one of my brothers.*

"Insolent as ever." Inarius sought out the darkest shadow and faced it. "So very insolent."

The shadow moved. Within it, a figure vaguely coalesced.

Inarius showed no sign of anxiety when that figure became another winged warrior he knew so well. "You are not Tyrael, and I am not afraid of him."

Are you not? Then why do I resemble him?

"Because you are a fool, demon."

This brought a chuckle. Then, as the other "angel" moved forward, he shifted form again. Now he was a human, but not just any. He was Uldyssian ul-Diomed.

The Prophet bared his teeth. "Again, you are a fool. You have some reason for approaching me. Do so without the theatrics!"

The shadow in the corner suddenly spread forth, all but enveloping the false Uldyssian. As it did, his form distorted. The demon grew less distinct and certainly far less human. He became as much imagination as substance, and as he did, Inarius again felt unsettled, though he dared not show it.

The shadows now encompassed most of the chamber in the direction where the dark being stood. The angel was aware that beyond his sanctum, his followers were suddenly experiencing fears that they did not even know they had. The guards at his doors would be trembling, and there was even a good chance that some had fled their positions. More than a few of his priests would likely be on their knees already, praying that the darkness touching their souls would soon leave them.

They did not know how fortunate they were, for the demon who visited Inarius could have done much worse. It was only that he, like the angel, dared not fully reveal himself.

There were those even the Lord of Terror feared.

The thing in the shadows towered over Inarius. At times, the demon had a shape that was reminiscent of a twisted mix of man and animal. Yet it was the face that most stirred the fears within, for it kept shifting. Inarius saw a skull with horns. Out of the eyes and jaws oozed blood. That horrific countenance became a melting head whose flesh was being constantly devoured by black flies and great worms. A more reptilian face then appeared, feminine and much like that of another demon Inarius had known.

But even Lilith's visage vanished a moment later, to be replaced again by that of the other angel. As the Prophet frowned, the demon laughed and changed again. Now empty shadow greeted Inarius, and

for inexplicable reasons, this disturbed him more than any of his visitor's other forms.

Is this better, oh Prophet?

Ignoring the mockery, Inarius quietly replied, "When previously we faced each other, Lord Diablo, it was agreed that it would be the last time."

There are always more last times, Inarius. Although not so many as there used to be.

"And is that the reason for your coming?"

The demon's shape continually shifted in small ways, as if Diablo had no true form of his own. Each alteration, no matter how small, touched some chord with Inarius, although he ever kept his emotions masked. Diablo fed off the slightest fear.

My reason for coming is simple. His name is Uldyssian.

"Ah, of course. You and your brothers spent so much effort creating the Triune! I did warn you that it would fall."

Through no effort of yours.

Now it was the angel's turn to mock. "Are you so certain? You would do better to take a closer look."

He sensed the demon's fury and felt a wave of fear seek to take hold of him. Aware now, though, that it was Diablo's effort, Inarius shielded himself against the dark lord's power. The effort proved quite a strain, but Inarius succeeded.

Yet had both he and Diablo been human, their hesitation during the moment that followed might have been seen as two exhausted adversaries needing to draw a breath and recover.

Inarius was aware how powerful the demon lord was and knew that part of his own success came from Diablo's need to shield himself from other eyes. That, at last, revealed to the angel just why he had been visited so suddenly.

"So...that is it," the Prophet murmured, more confident now. "You are afraid of losing everything. The Lord of Terror is afraid."

I fear nothing! the emptiness that Diablo currently used as his face retorted. *No more than you, that is!*

"All goes as I desire—"

Taloned paws scraping across the immaculate marble, the demon moved closer, the vast shadow swelling with him in the process. Somehow, even lacking eyes, he managed to stare into Inarius's mind. *I tasted your fear, angel. There would have been nothing for me to devour if what you say is true. This mortal, this Uldyssian, he has become more than any of us would imagine. He risks all that either of us desires of Sanctuary!*

Inarius could not prevent a frown. "Two different desires, I might

point out.”

But with one overriding link. Diablo leaned close. There was a hint of that other angel’s countenance before the emptiness returned. *Neither of the destinies we fight for will happen if this mortal continues along his path.*

The Prophet turned away from his unwanted guest, but not because of fear of Diablo. Rather, he saw too well the demon lord’s point and could not help but consider it.

As often as Inarius had threatened to wipe clean Sanctuary and begin anew, in truth, he did not wish to go to such an extreme. He had molded the world to his liking for far too long. He had grown too...*comfortable.*

The demons, of course, sought Sanctuary and, especially, its humans, for another, more base reason. They saw in humans the warriors that they needed to tilt the struggle in their favor.

And as Diablo had said, if Uldyssian managed to keep raising his people beyond what even Inarius had imagined their limits, then very soon neither he nor the demons would have say over man.

THAT CAN NEVER BE! Inarius thought angrily. He turned back to the demon, who had stayed silent during his considerations. “You are offering an alliance.”

The Lord of Terror laughed harshly. *You make it sound as if such a thing were unthinkable, angel! I recall that you have made pacts with my kind more than once.*

Inarius could certainly not argue with him there. As in those other times, though, he intended that the advantage would be his. He had learned from his one mistake, learned from Lilith.

And against the cunning of Lilith, even Diablo paled. A pact could be manipulated. Diablo would certainly try it.

With practiced ease, the Prophet went to his favorite couch and settled there, as if the figure before him were a supplicant, not a master demon. He sensed Diablo’s anger at this insult but knew that the Lord of Terror needed his resources, his Cathedral of Light, for whatever he planned.

Still, Inarius was curious about what Diablo had to offer this alliance. “I will listen.”

Clearly restraining his powers, the monstrous being explained, *Through a minion of mine, I have learned of one who would be eager to help us. Indeed, he is near and already eager for Uldyssian’s blood...or body, that is.*

“Body?”

Yes...and for it as his reward, he will be the key to eliminating the threat this mortal makes.

“Of what use is another demon?”

Diablo grunted at what apparently was Inarius’s ignorance. *He is not demon, though his mind is worthy of one. He is a man...or, rather, was. Alone, he will fail, but with both of us to guide him, he cannot but succeed.*

“A mortal against another mortal?” It made an ironic sense to Inarius, and if a mortal was Diablo’s pawn, he would be that much easier for the angel to manipulate later. “And who is this man who no longer is?”

You knew him well...so very...when he was the high priest of Mefis.

Mefis. Mephisto. Yes, Inarius knew very well of whom the demon lord spoke. “Malic?” The Prophet allowed a slight smile to grace his mortal countenance. “Malic.”

Yes. Diablo allowed a face of his own—a less disturbing one, of course—to shift into focus...and with the angel shared another smile.

Eleven

Mendeln was hiding something, that much Rathma sensed. As he materialized among the marching edyrem—startling not a few—he felt a part of his pupil’s mind hidden from him.

Immediately, he reached out to Trag’Oul to inform the dragon of this.

I know it already, the creature replied. And whatever method with which he shields it is immune to even my inquiries.

But that’s not possible! Rathma knew of no manner by which the mortal, even as gifted as he was, could achieve such a feat.

No, it is not, agreed the dragon. For him.

Rathma also noted that Mendeln was doing his best to ignore him. This infuriated the Ancient more than he could believe.

“Mendeln ul-Diomed, we need to talk.”

Uldyssian’s brother glanced back. “We are nearly at the gates of Kehjan. It’ll have to wait. I am trying to figure out how to avoid a war.”

“Any blood spilt between the edyrem and the mage clans is insignificant against the true danger.”

“Not if some of that blood belongs to Uldyssian!” Mendeln snapped with unusual vehemence.

His reaction only convinced the son of Inarius that there was indeed more going on than Mendeln wished to tell him. Rathma had a terrible idea what that might be.

“We will talk, son of Diomedes—and now.”

His student paused. The other edyrem wisely moved on as the two black-clad figures stared at each other.

“Talk? At your convenience, as usual,” the mortal blurted. “When I need to talk, you are elsewhere! When I need answers, you only provide puzzles!”

There was something terribly amiss. Rathma surreptitiously reached out with his powers. He searched the jungle very carefully, thinking in terms of his father’s cunning.

And there he finally saw what he believed Mendeln was hiding.

Achilios shadowed the edyrem horde.

His expression not changing, Rathma murmured, “I see. Forgive me for not understanding the problem.”

Mendeln reached out to him. “No! It’s not—”

But Rathma had already vanished, to reappear in the jungle behind the stalking hunter.

“I am sorry to do this, Achilios,” he declared.

Almost too late, the Ancient recalled that this was not a being bound by living limits. Before he had even finished speaking, the archer had spun around and readied an arrow.

It flew past Rathma’s ear, distracting him more than anything else. That was apparently all that Achilios desired, for instead of attacking, he immediately leapt into the underbrush.

But if the hunter thought that sufficient to keep Rathma from him, he was sorely mistaken. Now better prepared for what he faced, the Ancient vanished.

The look on the archer’s deathly countenance when the son of Inarius materialized right before him might have been humorous under other circumstances. Achilios gaped, then grabbed for a good-sized knife at his waist.

NO.

The voice stopped both dead in their tracks. Rathma was struck far harder than Achilios, who had likely heard that voice often in the past days. Rathma whirled around, seeking the speaker and growing anxious that he could not even sense the slightest trace.

Eyes blazing, he turned back to the archer. Achilios said nothing, but his expression told Rathma all that he needed to know.

“It is him,” the Ancient breathed. “It is him.”

But before more could be said, there came shouts from the direction of Mendeln and the edyrem. Rathma looked that way.

The sky ahead had suddenly turned an unsettling green.

He looked again to Achilios, whose expression had not changed. Rathma hesitated for a moment, then vanished from the spot.

The son of Inarius reappeared near Mendeln—and beheld a sight that without doubt had no natural origin.

The green filling the sky was that of a brightly colored insect—to be precise, the mantis. Never in all his long life had Rathma ever witnessed so many mantises, especially together. Mantises were solitary creatures, but these swarmed in numbers that dwarfed even the greatest gatherings of locust. From the direction of the capital, they came, and Rathma did not have to have the wisdom of generations to know that there was no coincidence. The only question remained was just who was responsible. The mage clans, perhaps, or his father.

Or perhaps Achilios’s new master.

But that hardly mattered now. The swarm was nearly upon the

edyrem, and as the mantises descended, they seemed to swell in size. From a few inches, they grew to more than a foot and kept growing.

While initially stunned, Uldyssian's followers did not continue to stand and wait. Serenthia gave a shout and threw her spear into the swarm. As the weapon flew, a fiery aura burst into being around it, one that swept over any nearby insect the spear passed. Engulfed by the flames, more than a dozen of the creatures immediately perished.

And as this happened, those with her attacked in a variety of manners designed for maximum carnage. Balls of energy, buffers of pure sound, whatever could slaughter the mantises by the scores struck the gargantuan swarm.

But Rathma noticed quickly that despite the hundreds of huge bodies already littering the area, the mantises' numbers did not appear to diminish. If anything, the swarm seemed to grow.

He wasted no time in calling to one who might better understand. *Trag, do you see all this?*

The dragon's reply was immediate. *I sensed its beginnings and quickly sought what was going on.*

This is not the work of the mage clans, is it? Rathma asked, even as he prepared to join the conflict.

No...this was brought together by a power far greater than they.

Trag'Oul did not have to elaborate. Rathma understood exactly what he meant.

He searched the area for Mendeln and was not surprised at all to discover Uldyssian's brother among the missing. The Ancient could scarcely believe that Mendeln would betray the rest, but no other explanation made sense.

Something else occurred to him. He reached back to where he had last sensed Achilios and found him also gone.

This is a diversion...this is all a diversion.

To verify that, Rathma surveyed the tableau. The edyrem attacked and attacked, and the mantises kept coming and coming. There could not be so many of the insects in all of Sanctuary, yet they were without end. The creatures landed among Uldyssian's followers, biting and scraping them, but thus far, he saw not one serious injury, not even among the younger and older. The swarm also never flowed any faster than the humans could handle them. Just enough to keep them harassed and unable to advance.

Unable to reach Kehjan.

Rathma did not have to ask why. He knew that if Mendeln had not already somehow transported himself into the capital, then he was well on his way.

The question was, what did the angel he now appeared to serve

desire of the younger brother?

There was only one way to discover the reason. With a last glimpse of the struggle, Rathma went to Kehjan.

Uldyssian reached out to Serenthia and Mendeln and again confronted a vague barrier. A part of him chided the son of Diomedes for not immediately heading back to them, but another kept reminding Uldyssian of what could be gained for not only the edyrem but all humanity if he succeeded here.

And it appeared that his hopes were not without reason, for Prince Ehmada came to him late in the day and said, "We don't have much time. The mage council has agreed to meet with you, but it must take place just after the sun has gone down. No later."

"Why the sudden urgency?"

"I am a mere prince," his host said with a mock shrug, "and understand little of the ways of spellcasters."

Uldyssian suspected that Ehmada knew far more than he indicated but left it at that. He trusted in the prince. "And the guilds?"

"They will be there also. I should tell you, Ascenian, that such a swift gathering of both sides together says much concerning their interest in you."

Uldyssian's head suddenly pounded, but even as he reached a hand up, the pounding went away. Prince Ehmada looked concerned. "My friend, are you ill?"

"No...I'm fine." Still, there had been something familiar about the sensation, as if it originated with someone else and not him, someone he knew well, too. Mendeln? Serenthia? Was one of them seeking to contact him?

Before he could pursue the thought, Uldyssian suddenly sensed another presence.

The mage Kethuus materialized before them. "Zorun Tzin is dead."

At first, Uldyssian was not certain whether the shadowy man referred to his captor or Malic in his guise as Zorun. Kethuus quickly corrected himself.

"Zorun Tzin was traced to an area below the city. There was some hint of his magic, but it faded in one particular location. That can only mean that he's truly no more."

"And Malic? What about Malic?"

"This spirit of which you speak cannot be sensed in any way. It's been suggested that when Zorun's body perished, so, too, did this Malic."

Uldyssian could scarcely believe that. "There must be some way to

be certain!”

“All manners of detection that the mage council’s established have been used. They verified Zorun’s death at the location and found no trace of any such creature as you describe the high priest.” Kethuus grinned, his white teeth a great contrast to his almost-invisible face. “Perhaps you can do better.”

It was not a suggestion but rather a challenge. Uldyssian, aware more than anyone of what a threat Malic was, could not refuse it. “Will you take me to where you last traced Zorun Tzin? Are you allowed to do that?”

“Of course.”

“It is but three hours until the sun sets,” Prince Ehmada reminded him. “I would recommend not being delayed.”

“Have no fear. I’ll see that the Ascenian gets back in time and in one piece.” Kethuus sneered. “He’ll find the council and the guilds far more trouble than this Malic, believe you me.”

“This must be done,” Uldyssian told his host. “Believe me. I failed to make certain that he was truly dead the last time. Whatever harm Malic causes in his hunt for me I feel in great part responsible for.”

“May the ancestors watch over you, then,” Ehmada replied with a bow.

Kethuus sneered again, obviously not as strong in his belief in such things as the noble. “Shall we be gone, or do you wish to natter on for a while longer?”

Although well impressed by Kethuus’s abilities, Uldyssian cared little for the mage himself. He seemed typical of the arrogance that the son of Diomedes expected of his kind, which did not bode well for the upcoming gathering.

The sooner they were back, the better Uldyssian would like it. “Take me there.”

Touching his chest, Kethuus obeyed.

The transition was nigh instantaneous. The two stood in an alley in the midst of the capital. Tall but obviously neglected buildings crowded around them.

“I thought that we’d appear in the tunnels,” he said to his companion.

Kethuus lowered his hand. For the first time, Uldyssian noticed the medallion the other wore. Runes etched around the blue stone in the center faded from illuminated gold to dull brass even as he watched. This was the equivalent to Zorun Tzin’s staff, Uldyssian realized.

“One doesn’t go blindly belowground,” Kethuus explained in a tone that mocked Uldyssian for not knowing that. “The tunnels are the oldest places in all Kehjan. Some say they were built for a previous

city raised before men ever existed.”

“And who would’ve built it?”

The hooded mage stamped his boot on a small pattern carved into the path. To Uldyssian’s astonishment, part of the rock slid away, revealing a hole down which rusted metal rungs could be seen on one wall. “Some say angels and demons.”

Kethuus did not elaborate, instead dropping down into the hole and climbing out of sight. The son of Diomedes quickly followed suit.

As he descended below the alley, the stone slid back into place above him. Uldyssian tried unsuccessfully to shake off the notion that he had entered a trap.

At the bottom, Kethuus created a small, illuminating globe. Uldyssian did not imitate him, preferring for the moment to let the spellcaster assume that his powers were greater than the outsider’s. It had become abundantly clear that, at least where Kethuus and his two comrades were concerned, Uldyssian’s power was suspect. That despite Amolia’s earlier attempt to seize him.

Shrugging off the prejudices of his possible allies, he waited with growing impatience while Kethuus led him along the ledge of the vast water system. Uldyssian had expected to descend only a short distance from their destination, but Kethuus turned from one confusing passage to another.

And only then did Uldyssian wonder if it was actually the mage he followed.

Unseen by the figure in front of him, his hand balled up into a fist that glowed a faint crimson. Uldyssian could not believe that he had not considered such a trick by Malic. The dread spirit was cunning enough to take one of the very hunters after him and use that body to bring his ultimate prey to where the high priest could deal with him. Malic would know that his foe would insist on trying to track him, which meant that the high priest would be certain to lay some sort of trap.

But now alerted, Uldyssian had every intention of turning the tables on Malic. If he was correct, then Kethuus was already dead, and so there was no fear in harming him.

“Is it much farther?” he asked, seeking to keep his adversary unaware of his discovery.

“Not far. Have no fear....”

The continually mocking tone only further encouraged Uldyssian that he was correct in his assumption. Certain of his triumph, Malic could not even hold back his disdain.

The only thing that held Uldyssian back from attacking was curiosity about just what Malic planned when they reached wherever

it was they were going. Uldyssian suspected that perhaps the high priest had located some surviving acolytes of the Triune to assist him. If so, it would behoove the son of Diomedes to see that none of them left the tunnels alive.

They journeyed on in silence, the only other noises the churning of the water and their own breath. Just when Uldyssian decided that he would wait out Malic's little game no longer, the figure ahead paused.

"Here. The entrance we descended was the nearest physical way to reach this spot. Don't worry, though, Ascenian; we'll get you back in time to meet the council."

"I don't doubt that at all," Uldyssian replied, keeping his hand hidden.

The hooded spellcaster leaned down near the water's edge. He pointed at an area just to his left. "That's where all trace of Zorun Tzin ends. His body is not in the water. We would've detected that. It simply ceased to be."

"The safer for covering Malic's tracks, wouldn't you say, Kethuus?"

The mage looked up. "Or simply where this supposed ghost ended when the body was no longer able to sustain him. You said yourself that the bodies didn't last long."

"But long enough to find him another." Uldyssian pretended interest in the findings as he maneuvered closer to his companion. He wanted to make certain that Malic would not escape him this time. It put him at risk as well, but to Uldyssian it was more than worth it.

"We've found nothing to the contrary. All trace of Zorun Tzin stops here, as I said!"

"But we're not looking for him," Uldyssian reminded. "We're looking for Malic, high priest of Mefis."

Kethuus rose. In the glow of his sphere, his dark face looked monstrous. "If such a creature as you say he was exists, we would've found something! You were tortured, Ascenian, and Zorun Tzin would've been a master of that. What you thought happened was, in the opinion of more than just myself, your imagination."

"Was it just that...Malic?"

The mage's expression contorted as he registered just what the other had called him. "You can't seriously believe that I am—"

Uldyssian raised his fist...and the water before the two men erupted. Both were drenched by a foul-smelling wave. Uldyssian lost his balance and fell into the channel. Kethuus tumbled into the wall, and only a last-minute grasp by the mage kept him from joining the son of Diomedes.

Sinking below the surface, Uldyssian fought to breathe. Something that was not a fish moved past him in the murky water. He blindly

struck out at it, the water boiling as he unleashed what he had planned to use on Kethuus.

The mage was not Malic. Uldyssian cursed himself for falling prey to such a notion. Malic would hardly have let himself be so endangered, and certainly he would not have wanted to risk the body he had so avidly sought.

Something akin to a serpent wrapped around his leg. Pulling against it, Uldyssian felt several sharp edges cut into his flesh. He almost cried out, only at the last moment able to prevent himself from doing so and thus filling his lungs with water.

As it was, he already ached for air. Uldyssian tried to reach the surface, but whatever held his leg kept him just inches from salvation.

In desperation, he reached up, snatching at the air his lips sought. If he could only bring it to him...

And as his cupped hand came back underwater, it brought with it a huge bubble that radiated a faint golden aura. Uldyssian dragged the bubble to his mouth and inhaled. His lungs filled. He brought to his mouth another and another, all the while kicking to keep the unseen threat from pulling him down farther.

From above, there came a glow reminiscent of the sphere Kethuus had summoned. A moment later, that very globe shot down through the water, heading past Uldyssian. It soared deeper, descending, he realized, toward whatever held him.

As it struck, Uldyssian caught sight of the demon.

He knew it could be nothing else. Nothing born of Sanctuary could have so grotesque a form. It had a multitude of leafy yet sharp tentacles and a bulbous body that reminded Uldyssian of a bubble. Odd things floated within. He had the horrific feeling that he was to join them inside.

Again, Uldyssian felt his lungs aching. As Kethuus's glow light faded away, the son of Diomedes used the last of the light to aim at the demon.

But the creature immediately released him, vanishing into the dark muck. Uldyssian had to forgo his attack; he needed air and needed it fast.

The instant his head broke the surface, Uldyssian inhaled. The air tasted so sweet to him that for a moment he thought of nothing else.

And that was when the demon attacked again.

There were tentacles everywhere, even around his throat. One wrapped around his mouth. He was pulled under.

From somewhere came Kethuus's shout, then the water filled Uldyssian's ears. He was pulled into the darkness.

However, the air that he had managed to gulp enabled him to think

better. Uldyssian focused on the demon's many appendages.

Despite the surrounding water, the son of Diomedes made them *burn*.

A manic bubbling sound erupted from below him, so loud that Uldyssian thought he would go deaf. The demon withdrew its fire-engulfed limbs from him and began in vain to try to shake the flames off.

Uldyssian glanced down as he headed toward the surface. In the light of the unnatural fire he had created, the demon looked even more horrific. There were tentacles everywhere, half of them burning. The flames created an aura about the creature that would have been even more terrifying if not for the fact that it was actually harming the demon, not a part of it.

Uldyssian's head broke the surface again. He blinked clear his gaze, then focused on a dim illumination ahead.

Kethuus, another glow ball near his head, crouched low as Uldyssian swam toward him. He reached out a hand, which, after a moment's hesitation, Uldyssian accepted.

"By the seven!" the shadowy man blurted. "I have seen things that would turn a man's skin whiter than yours, Ascenian, but never anything so...so..." Unable to come up with an appropriate word, Kethuus let his exclamation fade away.

Climbing onto the ledge, Uldyssian spat out some of the rank liquid and gasped. "It was a demon...a demon that Malic surely summoned!"

"I know not whether to believe you on that last point, but certainly it adds to your claim!" The hooded spellcaster grunted. "And you destroyed it with fire that not even water could lessen! You are truly what the stories claimed you to be!"

While Uldyssian was not displeased to hear respect at last in his companion's tone, he was more concerned with discovering just where Malic had gone.

The water bubbled again. Kethuus, staring past Uldyssian, raised a hand and began chanting.

Uldyssian spun around. The soaked ledge nearly caused him to slip back into the water, but he managed to keep his hold.

A fiery storm rained down upon the two men. The demon had ripped free its burning tentacles and now threw them.

Uldyssian clapped his hands together. An explosion of air tossed the tentacles away from him and Kethuus.

Yet as he succeeded there, the demon itself surged toward Uldyssian. From the bulbous body, a much-shorter appendage shot forth.

"I have it!" the mage called. He sliced at the air, and an arc of

energy severed the tip of the short tentacle.

The limb fell, but the tip continued on. Uldyssian gestured at it, and it exploded in their faces.

Kethuus screamed. At first, Uldyssian did also, but then the pain abruptly vanished. In fact, his entire body grew numb. His legs collapsed. As he fell against the wall, he saw that Kethuus, too, had lost all control of his body. The mage slumped nearby.

The now-familiar bubbling sound grew louder and louder. A stench that had nothing to do with the water filled Uldyssian's nostrils. The monstrous shape of the demon loomed over him.

A pair of tentacles wrapped around Uldyssian's torso, lifting him up like a rag doll. The demon drew its victim close.

Uldyssian's mind began to fog. Worse, he had no one but himself to blame for this catastrophe. He had walked into Malic's trap fully confident in his ability to outwit the spirit and had only succeeded in proving himself a great fool.

One thing kept him puzzled. Why would Malic wish him dead if he needed his body? The high priest had been determined to make Uldyssian his new host. Had he found someone better?

The demon raised him higher, then began moving away from the ledge. It appeared to have no interest in Kethuus, which boded even more ill for Uldyssian. That made him wonder if the creature intended to bring him to Malic. That would explain some things.

But no sooner had Uldyssian thought that than the demon lowered him to just below its odd body, then pulled him underneath. There, for the first time, the son of Diomedes saw what he assumed was the creature's mouth. The oval hole unsealed, and although within the demon there seemed some odd liquid, none of it spilled out.

This close, with the mage's second glow ball still burning, Uldyssian could see at last what some of the objects within were. Small bits of metal, things like buttons and belt hooks.

He now knew why the searchers had found no trace of Zorun Tzin's body.

His head was nearly at the mouth. Uldyssian could only imagine the terrible digestion process that would take place once he was within.

He fought back the fog. It finally receded, if only slightly. Uldyssian felt his powers returning. He had no time to think about what to do; as in such moments in the past, Uldyssian relied strictly on raw emotion to fuel his efforts. He stared into the demon's body.

The thick liquid within bubbled. The demon let out a squeal as the bubbling intensified. A brownish tint began to form all over the bulbous body.

The creature flung Uldyssian high in the air, battering him against the ceiling. Even through the remaining numbness, Uldyssian felt the tremendous shock from the collision. Yet he refused to falter in his own attack.

Squealing louder, the monstrous creature again threw his prey at the ceiling. Uldyssian used the new pain to fuel his emotion-driven assault.

The demon's body turned a dark brown. Inside, the sinister liquid began to vaporize. The bulbous body swelled.

The demon exploded.

In its death throes, it tossed Uldyssian up one last time. Caught unaware, Uldyssian hit his skull against the stone. The world spun around.

He struck the water, small bits of the demon spilling over him in the process. Uldyssian tried to orient himself, but his body would not function.

He sank beneath the water.

Twelve

Rathma.

There was no reply to the dragon's call. There had been no reply to the dozen before it. It was as if a veil had been thrown over part of Sanctuary, a veil that covered nearly all of the land of Kehjan and was, without a doubt, centered on its same-named capital.

But by Inarius alone, such a thing was not possible.

By Inarius alone.

And from everything that Trag'Oul could sense, this veil was not the work of two angels. No, there was a combination of powers involved here that Sanctuary had not experienced since its birth.

Angel and demon working together.

The glittering stars shifted about as Trag'Oul anxiously considered this. Angel and demon working together...and with but one possible reason.

There is no choice! he insisted. *There is no choice! I must act! I must go to the mortal plane.*

He began to draw forth the cosmic energies that would open the way for him. Only once before had Trag'Oul entered Sanctuary, and that had been just after the slaughter of the refugees by Lilith and Inarius's subsequent reactions. At that time, the dragon had materialized for just a few seconds, long enough to lay the groundwork for Rathma's discovery of him. He had chosen the son of Inarius well before that, seeing in him the spark that might help save the world should the angel decide it must be destroyed.

But now Trag'Oul would need to spend far longer than a few seconds. There would be no hiding himself from either the angel or the master demon with whom he worked.

And in revealing himself, Trag'Oul knew that he also risked ensuring the destruction of that which he had so long protected.

There is no choice, he told himself again. *No choice!*

The gateway was nearly complete, and then the voices struck him from all directions.

You cannot! You cannot! You cannot!

At the same time, the gateway disintegrated despite his best efforts to keep it from doing so.

Filled with an unaccustomed anger, he confronted the voices. *This is*

my burden! This is my duty! You have no say in this, none of you!

There was a moment of silence, and then, together, they responded, *But we do...this goes beyond Sanctuary now. Beyond all of us who stand sentinel.*

The dragon grew wary. *How so? How can that be?*

As ever, they answered as one, and, as before, their words struck him as nothing else could. *Because the war is coming to Sanctuary, and if you interfere with what the Balance demands, it and all existence may be forfeit.*

They left him, then, all the others who stood guard as he did over their separate worlds, left him with the knowledge that it was his Sanctuary whose imminent fate might decide theirs. They left Trag'Oul with the understanding that all his years of aiding the Worldstone in shielding Sanctuary from the outside had come to naught.

It was not merely one angel who had discovered Inarius's creation. The High Heavens themselves now knew of the world.

The eternal war was coming to Sanctuary...and he had just been forbidden to do anything about it.

* * *

Amolia appeared before Prince Ehmada, her dark expression matching her mood. "The council is not pleased. Uldyssian ul-Diomed does his cause no favor by slighting them like this!"

The prince sat in his personal chambers, sipping quietly from a flagon. There was but one candle lit, on the small table where he now set his drink.

"It was wrong to trust in him," Ehmada remarked with a frown. "I only just found out from a spy of my own that he's gone and made a pact with the Prophet to bring down the mage clans and the guilds and share all the land between his followers and the Cathedral."

The blond woman looked not entirely surprised. "I thought him a base villain. You have proof of this?"

"I do, but I must present it to the council." He rose. "It would be best if you took me there immediately, since they are already assembled."

"There's been no discussion of you appearing before them. If you have something to relay, give it to me, and I'll tell them myself."

"That would not serve. I must face them. It is the only way."

Amolia shook her head. Her hand toyed with a medallion identical to that worn by Kethuus and others who served the mage council as they did. "Your daring is renowned, Prince Ehmada, as is your growing

presumptuousness. You have no true authority; the love of the people means nothing in the end. If you were to cease to be, they would forget you in a day. The council has no need to grant you an audience. Whatever you wish to pass on, you can pass on through me.”

Ehmad thrust a hand into his pocket. “As you say. That might be for the best, after all. They certainly would not expect it.”

“Expect what?”

The prince reached out with his other hand. Amolia moved to brush it aside, but instead Ehmad gripped her wrist tight.

“Expect me to strike from in their midst,” he answered, smiling in a dark manner, “as one of their own.”

“You’re not—” was as far as the mage got.

Prince Ehmad’s body crumpled. The other hand slipped out of the pocket...and from its grasp rolled a tiny crimson crystal.

The female spellcaster smiled exactly as the prince had a moment before. She reached down and retrieved the precious fragment, slipping it into a pouch on her belt. A gilded mirror caught her attention. She walked over to it, examining herself.

“Yes...you will do for the time. Long enough, anyway.”

“It would be wise to cease unnecessary admiration for yourself, my son,” came a musical male voice.

The mage turned to find the beatific figure of the Prophet standing over the body of the prince. A scowl crossed Amolia’s features. “It pays to adjust my thinking before moving on. The better to play the part.”

“There is only one part with which to concern yourself. That is the ultimate elimination of Uldyssian ul-Diomed. Nothing else matters,” the Prophet insisted imperiously. “And certainly not your vile tastes... Malic.”

The spirit sneered at the angel, despite the fact that the latter could likely send him permanently back to the grave. “Vile, am I? But I serve the cause of the Cathedral and its glorious master.”

“And that is the only reason you are still permitted to walk this plane. You have had a holy task set upon you; do not waste what little chance of redemption you have by making it otherwise.”

But Malic laughed regardless. “A so holy task! Such blood and slaughter are worthy of any of the orders of the Triune! You would have made as good a Primus as my lord Lucion!”

The youthful figure stretched forth an open hand toward the spirit, and suddenly Malic felt himself wrenched from the latest body he had stolen. The mage’s form weaved back and forth as he desperately sought to maintain a tie to it. Despite his efforts, the high priest was pulled forward.

Inarius closed his hand, then let it casually fall to his side.

Malic's spirit was flung back into Amolia's body. The specter teetered from the strain of what had just happened.

"You will know your place, sinner," the Prophet remarked. "You will be grateful that you are deemed worthy to serve me."

"And...and another," rasped Malic in Amolia's voice. "The Lord Diablo."

The angel paid his slight defiance no mind. Instead, Inarius gazed down at the prince. "This was a good man, and I weep for his necessary sacrifice, just as I do for the guard you used to reach him and even the brigand whose shape you wore to reach the guard. I weep for all my children who must pass from Sanctuary in order to save it. Their loss will be remembered fondly by me always."

And with that, he waved his hand over Ehmada's corpse. As had happened to Gamuel, the prince became dust that blew away to nothing.

Malic watched silently, his breathing still heavy. He did not need to ask for the Prophet to deal with the other two bodies mentioned, for the high priest had his own methods of disposing of unwanted evidence.

That made him consider what he would have to do after this latest shell had served its usefulness. He wanted an end to this; he wanted the body that would serve him best...serve him forever.

"I still claim his corpse when this is done," Malic reminded his tormentor. "That was the offering by you and the Lord of Terror. Do this thing as you say, and I become Uldyssian ul-Diomed. That was promised!"

"You will receive your reward for services rendered, yes. I do not lie."

The Prophet might not lie—and Malic was not so certain about that point—but there were many variations of his truth. Malic could not see the angel stomaching his continued existence; Inarius surely intended the specter's time in his desired body to be short.

But the high priest had notions of his own. Whatever agreement the angel and Lord Diablo had, Malic would see that it would benefit him, not mean his end.

"The council and the guilds are waiting," Inarius stated, his form beginning to lose definition. One ethereal hand drew a series of flaming runes in the air. "Touching this pattern on the medallion will enable you to utilize its ability to transport you to them."

Malic had already known that, but he bowed his head regardless. He had shown enough defiance; now it was time for contrition.

"Do not fail in this" were the angel's last words before he vanished.

“I have no intention,” the specter murmured to the empty air. “Not, at least, where my plans are concerned.”

Now fully recovered from Inarius’s painful lesson, Malic glanced again at the mirror, then touched the medallion. The runes glowed.

“Soon...” he whispered, imagining Uldyssian’s face before him. “Soon...”

The swarm had finally retreated. It had not been vanquished, however. The sky had still been filled with the vicious insects, but just when the edyrem had been about to fail, the mantises had at last risen back into the sky and fled in the direction from which they had come.

The edyrem could do nothing but slump to the ground in exhaustion. Had the mage clans or the city sent out a force to attack them, there would have been some question of how many of Uldyssian’s followers would have survived.

Serenthia was as exhausted as any of the others, but she forced herself to continue walking around the encampment, appearing as a symbol of confidence for the rest. In truth, her spirits were low, and not merely because of the bizarre attack. Now Mendeln was missing. The merchant’s daughter had little doubt that the swarming had something to do with that.

They’re all gone, Serenthia thought as she kept a false smile on her lips. Saron wearily saluted her, then went back to trying to organize some of the others. Of Jonas, there was no sign, but she felt certain that he was in the midst of a similar task. Serenthia was grateful for both men’s loyalty and assistance, but they were not Uldyssian, Mendeln, or...or even Achilios. She was alone, and there was a fear that it would remain that way.

So close to the capital, the illumination caused by so many torches and oil lamps could be seen over the treetops. Out of necessity, Serenthia posted guards, all the while hoping that there would be no need of them.

When she felt that she had shown herself enough, Serenthia retired to a secluded area near the rear of the encampment. She ate a small meal that one of the edyrem offered her—they never let her cook for herself—then settled down and prayed for a decent night’s slumber and the good news of Uldyssian and his brother.

But a comfortable sleep was not to be hers. The dreams came quickly, and all of them had to do with losing Achilios again. If she did not relive his death, then she stood at the opposite end of a great gulf, stretching her hands out in vain to him as he receded farther and farther away. In every dream, the raven-tressed woman cried, and as

she slept, actual tears slid down her face.

Serenthia...

Her eyes immediately opened, but whether or not she was still asleep, she could not say. It was not possible that she had heard *his* voice. Achilios's voice.

But then it came again. *Serenthia...*

Rising, the merchant's daughter peered into the nearby jungle.

A pale figure half hidden by the underbrush stared back at her. Serenthia almost shouted his name, so thrilled was she. Then, suddenly more wary, she surveyed those nearby. The nearest sentry was far away, and the other edyrem were asleep. Only she had heard the archer's voice.

If it *was* actually him.

Suddenly cold with anger that someone might be using his image to lure her, Serenthia seized her spear. She reached out with her power, seeking any hint of another presence, but barely even finding that of the hunter.

There was only one way to settle whether or not this was actually Achilios. Aware that her heart was leading more than her head, Serenthia slipped out of the encampment.

As she neared him, the pale figure retreated deeper into the jungle. Serenthia readied her spear, more wary than ever. She continued to survey the region but still sensed no one but herself and what might be the man she loved.

When they were just out of sight of any possible onlookers, Achilios paused. Serenthia did the same.

"Is it you? Is it you, Achilios?"

He nodded once. "Yes...Serenthia."

She was still not convinced, although her heart ached to be. "Why now? Why at this point when you fled the other times?"

The archer brushed some loose dirt from his cheek. His effort proved futile. "At first...it was so that...that I would keep you...keep you from seeing me...as I am."

"Oh, Achilios! You know that I don't care about—"

He cut her off with a slashing gesture. "I'm *dead*, Serenthia! Dead!"

She would not accept that even such a state meant the end of what had been between them. "With all that I've seen, with all that I've fought, death doesn't scare me, Achilios."

"So it would...would seem." A rueful smile stretched across his face. "Why did you...have to fall...to fall in love with me...at last?"

It was more than she could take. Still clutching the spear, Serenthia rushed to Achilios. She wrapped her arms around him and held tight. He did not resist, but neither did he imitate her actions.

When it was clear that he would merely stand there, Serenthia finally looked up into his face and happened to see up close the dark, congealed gap where once his throat had been.

It made her gasp and back up, but not for the reasons the archer thought. As Achilios turned bitterly from her, Serenthia realized just how it had appeared to him.

“No! Please! It wasn’t out of fear or disgust! Achilios!” Ignoring how loud her voice was growing, Serenthia cupped his chin in her free hand and made him look into her eyes. “I was angry! Angry for what happened to you!”

He shook his head. “You’re...you’re truly...amazing.”

“I love you, that’s all.” Her eyes narrowed. “You said ‘at first’ that it had to do with not wanting me to see you as you are! What was the reason after that?”

Achilios pushed back from her. He gritted his teeth, as if seeking to keep in the answer. “For the same...for the same reason...that I tried to kill...to kill both you and...and Uldyssian! For the same...for the same reason...I’m finally with you...at last...” The undead hunter looked to his right. “Because of him...”

A brilliant light blossomed from there, one that made Serenthia immediately tighten her grip on her spear. In the midst of that light, she saw the tall figure emerge. Vast wings composed of tendrils of energy rose up behind him.

“Inarius!” Shoving Achilios back, she raised the weapon.

“No, Serenthia...” The archer grabbed her wrist. “Not Inarius...”

“Not—” She had no idea how that was possible to know, never having seen him. All Serenthia had to go by was Rathma’s and Mendeln’s descriptions, which certainly fit the celestial figure before her. True, there were minor details that she thought should have been different, but this was an angel! How many angels were there on Sanctuary, after all?

Belatedly, she recalled that there might be another, but her mind wanted to refuse that. They could not fight two angels.

“He comes...in peace.”

That stirred her anger anew. “Peace? Isn’t this the one who made you shoot at Mendeln and me?”

THAT WAS BEFORE.

The voice resounded in both her head and her heart. Serenthia’s pulse raced.

THAT WAS BEFORE, the angel repeated, the light around him—light surely visible to all in the camp—pulsating with each word. *WHEN IT WAS NOT CLEAR TO ME THE COURSE NEEDED.*

“What does he mean by that?”

“He will...tell you...just be...patient.”

THE EDYREM MUST BE READY, the angel answered unhelpfully. He did not exactly walk toward them but rather seemed to be closer, then closer yet, then even closer than that.

There was no face, but more something that seemed a visor made of light. The angel was impossibly tall and so bright that Serenthia had to squint a little. She was also surprised that no one had yet come running to see what was going on.

IT IS NOT MEANT FOR THE OTHERS TO SEE US TOGETHER, AND SO THEY DO NOT.

Which meant that, no matter what happened here, the other edyrem would not know the truth. That revived her wariness of the angel.

“Please, Serenthia...please listen...to him. I know...I know that’s much to...to ask...believe me.”

It was only because she was certain that Achilios spoke for himself and not because of some spell of the angel’s that the merchant’s daughter relaxed her grip—a little. “All right. I’ll listen.”

“Mendeln knows, too,” Achilios continued, sounding a bit more human. A bit more...alive. “He knows...and that is why...why he was sent...ahead.”

“To the city? By himself?”

“Mendeln is...never alone...and he of all of...us...can best find Uldyssian...if there’s...if there’s hope.”

Serenthia dared gesture at the angel. “And what does this have to do with him? Why is he now trying to help us?”

It was not Achilios but the winged figure who answered that question. *BECAUSE INARIUS HAS DONE—AGAIN—THE UNTHINKABLE. HE HAS MADE A PACT WITH ONE OF THE THREE... MADE A WILLING PACT. THAT, TOO, DEMANDED MY COURSE CHANGE.*

“One of the Three? Is he referring to the Triune, Achilios?”

“To the...the truth of the...Triune.” The archer grimaced. “You know...you know that demons...demons created it. You know that... the spirits of Mefis, Dialon...and Bala...are not what they...are made to be.”

“No, of course not! They’re each master demons, supposedly the rulers of—” She stopped short as the enormity of what he was trying to tell her finally became clear. “Surely not!” Her eyes wide, she looked to the angel. “One of the...one of the Three? Here?”

The angel dipped his head ever so slightly. *AND PERHAPS THE WORST OF THE THREE...HE WHO IS THE ESSENCE OF TERROR... THE LORD DIABLO.*

And as he said the name, Serenthia not only felt a chill throughout her body but sensed that the angel, too, fought back some anxiety. That such a mighty being as the one before her would be unsettled by merely speaking of this master demon gave indication of just how terrible this news was.

Trying to make sense of it, she blurted, "But if this demon is so powerful, how can Inarius risk any pact with him? It's sure to lead to his downfall."

AND IT WILL...ALTHOUGH HE DOES HAVE GREAT REASON TO FEEL THAT, IN THE END, IT SHALL BE LORD DIABLO...NAY...ALL OF US...WHO KNEEL BEFORE HIM...

"How is that possible? Was Inarius always so powerful among angels?"

There was a hesitation, as if the figure had to consider carefully what to say. *POWERFUL, BUT NO MORE SO THAN ANY ON THE ANGIRIS COUNCIL.... IT IS HERE...IN THIS WORLD THAT HE HELPED MAKE...WHERE INARIUS WIELDS POWER THAT MAKES THE LORD DEMON SEEK ALLIANCE...IT IS HERE WHERE HE HAS SUCCEEDED IN DISTORTING THE WORLDSTONE FOR HIS OWN GAIN, HIS OWN POWER.*

The Worldstone. She knew of it from Uldyssian, knew that it was a phenomenal artifact, a massive crystal, that not only preserved Sanctuary's presence from the outside but had been manipulated by Inarius once to dampen the latent powers of humans. Lilith had managed to alter its magic slightly, just enough to encourage the rebirth of the nephalem—or, as they were called now, the edyrem.

SOMEHOW HE WAS ABLE TO ALTER THE WORLDSTONE'S FOCUS—PERHAPS WITH THE UNKNOWING HELP OF HIS FELLOW RENEGADES—THEN BIND HIMSELF UTTERLY TO IT AND THUS ENSURED THAT NONE WHO HAD ASSISTED HIM IN ITS THEFT WOULD BE AS POWERFUL.... IN TRUTH, IT IS ONLY HIS CONCERN FOR DISCOVERY BY THE ANGIRIS COUNCIL THAT PREVENTS HIM FROM DRAWING UPON ITS POWER EVEN MORE.

His words made Serenthia's hopes plummet. "Then all this time, Uldyssian never had a chance against him? All this time, the Prophet—Inarius—has been toying with us? It's all been for nothing?"

"No! Not nothing," Achilios interjected, at the same time seizing her by the shoulders. "Uldyssian is the only one...the only one who might be...be able to actually *defeat* Inarius here!"

"But how is that possible? How?"

"Don't...don't you recall what...Uldyssian did, Serenthia? Don't you...remember...what he said...happened? At the...the Worldstone?"

The Worldstone. Despite the growing turmoil of her thoughts, the

raven-haired woman quickly focused on what Achilios had said. Uldyssian had seen this Worldstone. He had been brought to it by Inarius's son, Rathma. Even Uldyssian's cursory description of it had left her marveling that such a thing could have been created, much less exist at all.

And then Serenthia recalled what Achilios had been trying to point out.

Uldyssian himself had *altered* the Worldstone in its very makeup. Altered it in a manner that apparently even Inarius could not unmake.

Inarius could *not* unmake it.

"Uldyssian is...the one hope against Inarius," Achilios acknowledged. "Even he..." The archer pointed at the angel. "Even he can't alter what Uldyssian did."

That knowledge stirred her as nothing else could. "Then we need to move on Kehjan as quickly as possible! If we awaken the others now, we can be there in just a few hours. Despite what you say, I'm certain that Mendeln can't do this by himself. We need to be there, need to march to the gates and tear them down if we must! We've got to find Uldyssian!"

The angel—who had yet to give any name—suddenly stood on her other side, causing Serenthia to gasp. *IF YOU WOULD DO SO, THEN YOU WOULD FALL DIRECTLY INTO THE TRAP ALREADY SET INTO MOTION...A TRAP THAT EVEN I CANNOT UNDO AT THIS POINT.*

"What? What is it? Is it about Uldyssian?"

IT IS ALL ABOUT YOUR FRIEND. For the first time, the angel appeared weary. *AND THE LIVES LOST THAT WILL NOW BE BLAMED ON HIM AND THE EDYREM.* He raised a gauntleted hand to her forehead, without permission touching the palm to her skin. *BEHOLD WHAT IS HAPPENING...WHAT WILL HAPPEN...*

There was something about this angel that still caused Serenthia concern, but she had no choice but to obey as what felt like her soul was ripped free of her body. Suddenly, she raced along the landscape toward the capital. It reminded her in some ways of the search that she and Uldyssian had made using their powers. That allowed her to regain some of her composure.

Over the massive walls, her view flew, over the walls and into the vast city. Images of buildings raced past, and even people briefly appeared.

Then...and then, somewhere deep in the middle of the city, her gaze dove directly into a heavily walled gray building. She passed through stone as if it did not exist and entered first a small, torchlit chamber and then, almost instantly, a much larger, more elaborate one.

And there Serenthia beheld horror that convinced her of the angel's every intention.

Thirteen

The mage council consisted of one chosen member from each of the dominant clans, which numbered seven. There were lesser members from the next seven smaller but still powerful ones below those, but they had no vote. They could recommend or bring up articles for debate, though. This gave them some influence and, thus, less inclination to protest the rulings by the senior members. In this manner, the mage council kept order among themselves, even when many clans were involved in bitter and deadly feuds with one another.

There was an additional factor that served to keep the council above the infighting. The enforcement arm had been created to make certain that no mage, whatever his position, escaped punishment for breaking the covenants set in place by the council. It drew to its ranks spellcasters willing literally to give a part of their essence to the council and thus no longer belong to a clan. Such mages were chosen carefully using many criteria, including trust in their determination to see their orders through to the end regardless of the obstacles.

And so, when Amolia appeared in their midst, she was acknowledged by the council and other attending mages as befit her position. The visiting masters of the guilds also eyed her respectfully; to them, the enforcers were the most trusted—if that word could be used for any of those present—of spellcasters.

The current leader of the council—the bearer of the title changed with each new moon in order to maintain fairness—stared down from the high platform where he and his counterparts sat and, in a voice cracked with age, demanded, “Where is this Uldyssian ul-Diomed? You were supposed to return with him!”

“He won’t be coming,” the figure before him replied. “I am here in his place with a message.”

A combination of surprise and disdain crossed more than one wrinkled face among the mages. Several merchants, most of them far more corpulent than the council, also appeared disproving of the announcement.

A well-coiffured figure with an elaborate emerald-encrusted nose ring declared, “We agreed, in great part due to the request of Prince Ehmada and the memory of our own lamented Fahin, to come to this gathering. If the mages have played some trick in cooperation with this Ascenian—”

“The Ascenian has made no advance pact with the council and would be turned away if he dared so,” returned the council leader. “We would not think of such a disrespectful action against our brothers in the guilds....”

Several of the guild masters smiled knowingly. As powerful as the spellcasters were, they depended too much on the guilds’ wares.

Throughout this exchange, Amolia—Malic—remained quiet. Only when all eyes turned back to him for explanation did he continue, as planned. “Master Uldyssian is not coming, but, as I said, I am to be his messenger.”

“Master’ Uldyssian?” The council leader grunted. “You have no masters but us, Amolia....”

Bowing low, Malic put a smile on his stolen face. “No longer! Master Uldyssian has shown me the truth. I exist to follow his path and remove from it all he has deemed heretical.”

“What does she mean by that babbling?” demanded a guild master. Several of those beside him rumbled their approval of this question.

Malic turned slowly to face the man. “It means that he has given me the honor of taking the first step toward liberating the people of Kehjan from the mages and the guilds!”

There were shocked protests from all around at this damning statement. On both sides, members of the gathering rose in anger.

Malic suddenly felt the might of the two who had sent him on this mission fill him. He suddenly knew how puny the powers of any of those in attendance were compared with Inarius or the Lord Diablo... or even him now.

“Amolia!” grated the council leader. “Your very words condemn you. Such foolishness! You know too well the hold upon all of your order. It shall be used now to mete out proper punishment for your declared betrayal, after which the Ascenian—Uldyssian ul-Diomed—shall be declared enemy of Kehjan and marked for death by all.”

Roars of approval rose from both spellcasters and guilds. Malic was unconcerned about the threat of punishment to Amolia. As she no longer existed, what essence they had of her was useless.

Besides, it was time for him to follow his commands.

“But it’s not I who is to be condemned,” he retorted, his smile widening. “Master Uldyssian had already condemned all of you!”

Malic did not even have to gesture. All he had to do was stare around him and let the will of the angel and the demon be done.

The tiny, glittering blades formed in the air around him, then shot forth like hungry flies in every direction. They spun with a swiftness that caused each to emit a faint buzzing sound, a sound multiplied by the thousands.

The guild masters certainly had no chance. Some wore protective talismans bought from greedy mages, but none of those so much as slowed the slaughter. The twirling blades cut through thick garments, then flayed flesh. Men screamed and tried to hide, but there was nowhere for them to go, for before unleashing the blades, Malic had sealed the exits.

The mages fared little better than the guildsmen. Most were too caught by surprise to cast any protective spell. A few managed to ward off the initial blades, but the power of Inarius and Diablo far outstripped even the most powerful of those assembled here. What success any mage initially had proved fleeting.

And so they were slaughtered. The gleaming silver blades—shaped like arced slivers—fulfilled their monstrous purpose. Blood splattered the chamber everywhere, so much that it pooled in many spots on the floor. The screams died down, becoming sobs from here and there... and then silence.

There was little left recognizable. Not an inch of skin remained on any of the victims. Aware that the Kehjan methods of torture preferred flaying, the angel and the demon had visited upon the gathering what they felt was quite an appropriate fate.

With the smile still playing over his host's face, Malic, untouched by either blade or blood, calmly made his way around the chamber. He paused here and there to inspect a body, but, not finding what he was looking for, he quickly moved on.

At last, the dread spirit located his prize—or two, to be exact. One was a mage, a part of the council, in fact. His life was passing swiftly, but Malic put a hand to his gory torso just where the heart—partially visible—was beating its last.

He felt the will of Inarius flow through. The flayed man let out a gasp. The heart beat a little faster. Of necessity, the pain had also been slightly lessened. They wanted this one alive...temporarily.

Malic performed the same ritual for a guild master whose left leg had been all but amputated by the blades. Gobbets of the rotund man's flesh lay spread around him like some macabre blanket. He, too, received the angel's gift.

There were witnesses now. They would survive just long enough to relate their tales, then pass on. The same spell that had kept them from death would also guarantee that they would recall enough but not too much. Their stories would be very similar but from their differing perspectives. The angel and the demon had made certain that there would be no questions from those who discovered them about just what had happened and who was responsible.

Uldyssian, of course.

Already there came banging on the doors. The guards and the mages with them likely did not understand why nothing they did opened the locks or removed the protective spells.

Malic sensed one or two more fleeting lives but knew that those poor fools would not be able to answer any questions. His mission here was done. Under normal circumstances, the medallion he had used to enter would now have required the work of one of those on the council to allow him to leave again. However, the powers he currently served made that unnecessary.

Malic grinned at the carnage, bowed...and disappeared.

He should be dead, drowned in the water.

But he was not, a fact made stranger by the discovery, when at last he was able to open his eyes, that he was *still* at the bottom of the underground canal.

To his credit, Uldyssian kept from panicking, despite this unnerving revelation. He could vaguely make out movement above him, most of it refuse flowing on. Without moving so much as a finger, the son of Diomedes cautiously sought to find the cause of his salvation—if that was what it was.

At first, Uldyssian thought it the work of the demon, but that made no sense at all. It had been intent on devouring him, that much had been obvious. Therefore, why preserve his life?

What else, then? Or rather, *who*? Kethuus? Again, Uldyssian knew that he followed a false lead. He had been conscious long enough to see the mage fall. Kethuus was either dead or immobile. There had been no help from him.

Then...who?

Something moved against the current. It was little more than a dark shadow, but it immediately made Uldyssian think of the demon again. He tensed, watching it as best he could.

It hovered at the corner of his eye, never quite coalescing into something that he could recognize. There were glimpses—mere glimpses—of what he *believed* were long, plantlike appendages and maybe the bulbous body, but never could Uldyssian be absolutely certain. Nonetheless, his heart pounded faster, and had he been on the surface, the son of Diomedes would have broken out in an anxious sweat.

Then there came a voice in his head, one that sent chills through him. *I've saved you, mortal...saved you from certain death.*

Who are you? Uldyssian thought back. *What are you?*

The shadow moved a bit more into his line of sight. Again,

Uldyssian thought he caught glimpses of something that resembled the attacking demon, but now there were other images as well. For a moment, he could have sworn that it was Inarius himself who hovered so close, and the fear that the angel had at last trapped him sent his blood surging yet faster.

It is not he who has come to you here, the voice said with some hint of mockery for having been mistaken for the Prophet. *The angel would leave you to die, but I am not so heartless!*

Who are you? Uldyssian repeated, now wondering how he could have ever thought for even an instant that this shadow was his foe. Inarius did not touch his primal instincts so. *Who?*

The shadow shifted closer yet. Dread memories of Malic arose, then passed, only to be replaced by a beauteous yet even more unnerving face briefly crossing Uldyssian's thoughts.

Lilith.

He fought down these resurrected fears. Lilith was dead, and Malic would not have left him untouched. They had nothing to do with what was happening now.

The shadow receded slightly. It spoke again, its tone soothing, placating. *They cannot touch you, Uldyssian, not while you're under my protection. As for who I am, I've many names, and some you know. One of those is Dialon.*

Dialon! Uldyssian understood immediately both who and what had prevented him from drowning. Dialon, said to be the spirit of Determination by the Temple of the Triune. Dialon, who Uldyssian knew was actually of the same blood—if one could use that term for demons—as Lilith, for he was brother to her father, the terrible Mephisto.

Diablo, Lord of Terror, was the only thing that kept Uldyssian from drowning.

You need have no fear of me, Diablo said, no doubt sensing the human's unease. *All things are turned about on Sanctuary, where angels commit sin and demons must try to make amends. I saved you because we two are much alike, for we're all that stands between Inarius and this world's death.*

Despite his predicament, Uldyssian found himself caught up by the master demon's words. What Diablo said about Inarius was very true. The Prophet clearly saw sin as something others did, not himself. His actions were "necessary." That hundreds died because of the angel's ego did not matter in the least.

Yes...you see him correctly. Inarius is mad in a manner that sends fear through the High Heavens and the Burning Hells. Yet he cannot be touched, for he's tied to the very foundation of Sanctuary, the Worldstone!

It's his power, his existence!

Uldyssian could find no fault in Diablo's statements, though he had not considered that both the High Heavens and the Burning Hells knew all that was going on. That sent a further chill through him. If both sides in the celestial conflict of which he had learned feared Inarius, then what did that mean for humanity's hopes?

The demon drew so close that Uldyssian could swear Diablo stared directly into his eyes. The son of Diomedes steeled himself. He had faced demons before.

There was a moment of silence, as if, for some reason, Diablo had to mull over his thoughts. Then...*But the angel is not so invulnerable as believed. You proved that...and you proved that you can reach into his very core and put fear into him.*

Me? But how?

You changed the Worldstone without even understanding it! You did what no other could and what the angel could not unmake. This gives us a chance if we are willing to strike quickly.

It had come to what Uldyssian had not believed possible. Diablo, Lord of Terror, was offering a pact. The demon wished to ally himself with a mortal against an angel.

It was so mad a notion that Uldyssian would have laughed if able to do so.

I am not Lucion, son of my brother, who preaches only hate. I am also not she who lived to twist all around her finger and then rip out their beating hearts. There is much I can offer in trust.

There was only one thing that Uldyssian wanted at the moment, and that was to reach the surface again. He found it suspicious that not once had Diablo offered to raise him out of the channel. Did the demon expect that Uldyssian would consider his offer while still trapped motionless yards underwater? If so, then truly Diablo and his ilk did not understand the thinking of mortals.

Return me to the ledge, he demanded. Then we can continue talking.

The shadow weaved about in the water. Uldyssian was very aware that he did not see the true form of the demon lord and was grateful for that favor.

In truth, you are safer here for the moment than anywhere else, mortal. Both the natural magic of water and my own power shield you from Inarius even now. Were I to bring you to the surface, you would immediately risk discovery.

Uldyssian did not care one bit about such a danger. Like most humans, he had a healthy respect for water, especially how easily it could fill one's lungs. *I want away from here!*

The danger is too great, but perhaps there is a way. But for it to

succeed, you must open your mind to me, allow me in a very small way to touch the power within you...just the slightest touch should do it.

As the shadow spoke, Uldyssian suddenly felt as if the water pressed down a thousand times harder on him. He grew claustrophobic, the sensation that he was about to be crushed or drowned magnifying beyond belief. Uldyssian started to agree to the demon's suggestion...but at the last moment somehow held back. A part of him questioned anew Diablo's reluctance to do anything until after the human had opened himself up.

That same part also finally questioned whether the Lord of Terror was actually even the one who had saved him. Why would Diablo leave him like this? Uldyssian doubted the reasons the demon had given. They sounded more like a means to keep the human at this terrible disadvantage, where he might be willing to sell himself entirely in order to escape this predicament.

And that made Uldyssian finally realize just who had initially kept him from drowning after he had destroyed the other demon. It had been none other than himself. Only now did Uldyssian sense the truth of that, and he knew that the reason it had earlier escaped him was Diablo's machinations. The demon lord had fed his innate terrors, making the son of Diomedes unable to focus enough to understand.

And still Diablo tried. *I sense Inarius near! Hurry! If we bind our strength together, we can bring him down!*

An urge to do as the shadow said arose within Uldyssian. Only with extreme effort did he manage to hold back from agreeing. Then, before anything else could deter his thoughts, Uldyssian began concentrating on freeing himself.

A wave of anger struck him. The demon lord dropped all pretense. *You're mine! You have no hope against me, human! With but a whim, I shall rip off your arms and legs and slowly feed your bleeding torso to my ravenous pets who even now fill the waters!*

Scores of dark shapes swam through the water toward Uldyssian. He suspected that they were only illusion, for Diablo still likely sought his surrender but dared not take the chance. With all his will, Uldyssian sought to rise from the channel and release himself from the spell his subconscious surely had created.

The insidious school closed on him. Crimson saucer-shaped eyes stared hungrily. Mouths full of rows of sharp teeth opened to bite.

With a swooshing sound, Uldyssian shot upward. He broke the surface and continued several feet higher. Only when his head was mere inches from the ceiling did his momentum abruptly cease.

His arms, his hands...his entire body was his again. Uldyssian marveled that he floated above the water. As a youth, the former

farmer had often imagined what it might be like to be a bird, but never had he expected actually to experience such flight himself.

From below came a wild roar. Out of the water burst the monstrous shadow, and as it rushed up at Uldyssian, it transformed a hundred times. Each incarnation was more horrific than the last, and nearly all the son of Diomedes could trace to his own innate terrors.

But despite his fear, Uldyssian stood his position. He also knew that he had to do more than that. He had to find some defense against Diablo. Only one thing occurred to him, one wild hope that seemed more likely to leave the Lord of Terror laughing in his face.

At his will, a fountain of water rushed up between him and the demon with more swiftness than Diablo could summon. That water even more quickly froze, its sides taking on a frosty but also mirrorlike finish.

And so Diablo looked upon *himself*.

Under any other circumstances, Uldyssian doubted that the demon would have been affected. Prepared for such a trick, the Lord of Terror would have adjusted. Here, though, Uldyssian's spell happened so quickly, and with so much instinct as opposed to preparation, that the demon could not have known what to expect.

Thus, Diablo inflicted upon himself that which he did unto others. The fears he had been thrusting upon the human altered to his *own*.

The shadowy figure let out a shriek that nearly made Uldyssian flee in mindless panic. Somehow, though, the son of Diomedes held. To do otherwise was to fail.

Diablo twisted and turned as his own insidious power wreaked havoc on him. He had only glanced for a moment, but the fears of the master of fear were evidently monstrous, indeed.

Still howling, Diablo rushed up into the ceiling—and through the very stone. His cry echoed throughout not only the underground passage but Uldyssian's soul.

It took the human a moment to realize that he was alone. Extreme exhaustion seized hold of Uldyssian. The frozen column of water collapsed, returning to the flow. Only with effort did he manage not to join it, instead using his will to push him to the ledge.

Once there, he leaned against the wall and caught his breath. Although Diablo was gone, and with him what little illumination there had been, Uldyssian saw well in the dark. First, the magical field that had kept him from drowning, and now this. Again, his powers had adjusted to his needs without him even consciously summoning them.

That made him recall what Mendeln had said, about his abilities controlling him more than he controlled them. For a second, Uldyssian seriously considered the repercussions that his brother had hinted at—

and then laughed at himself for fearing such. He and his abilities were one; how could he possibly be a danger to himself or anyone else because of that?

His head finally began to clear a little. Recalling Kethuus, Uldyssian rushed over to the mage, who still lay unmoving.

Even before he touched the spellcaster's chest, Uldyssian sensed that Kethuus was still alive. In fact, the dark-skinned man was in the same state the son of Diomedes had been in when first captured by the aquatic demon.

Not certain exactly what he was doing but positive that he could succeed, Uldyssian held his hand a few inches above the mage's body and ran it along the length from the heart to the head. At the same time, he willed Kethuus to be released.

The mage gasped, then coughed several times. His eyes, which had been staring blankly, now focused.

"Ascenian..." he murmured. "Uldyssian...is it...is it dead?"

Only then did Uldyssian realize that Kethuus knew of nothing concerning what had happened past the moment of his capture. That struck Uldyssian odd, for he had been conscious all the while. Had his will been that much stronger than the other man's?

"It's dead. I boiled it alive, which was no more vicious than the fate it planned for us."

"Of that I have no doubt." He accepted Uldyssian's hand. The latter pulled him to his feet, where Kethuus wobbled uncertainly for a few moments before regaining his balance. Once that was accomplished, the mage immediately summoned a light. "Without any aid, I do not think I would've fared as well as you."

Uldyssian eyed the murky water. "Wanting to live can enable someone to perform miracles."

"Not like yours." All trace of haughtiness had vanished from Kethuus. "You are everything I heard and even more. You could have also left me to rot, and you did not do that."

The mage's change of heart encouraged Uldyssian greatly. If someone as hard-skinned as Kethuus could be made to see the truth, then there was true hope of persuading the mage clans to join with him against not only Inarius but apparently a demon lord as well.

The mage clans. Uldyssian grimaced. "Kethuus, how long have we been down here?"

His companion immediately saw the reason for his concern. "I fear many hours. But have no fear. I will speak for you, Uldyssian! I—"

Kethuus suddenly clutched at his chest. Uldyssian reached to help him, but the dark man shook him off.

"They are...using that part of me that I sacrificed to the council to

find me! It is how they track enforcers who vanish, for our tasks on occasion are met with violence.” He straightened. “They know now where I am. No doubt, when we did not appear, they questioned Prince Ehmadi and discovered we were together.”

“Odd that they couldn’t find you before now.”

His comment was rewarded with a white but grim smile. “The demon’s spell must have shielded us from such.”

They had no chance to say more, for around them there materialized not one but nearly a dozen hooded mages. Among the newcomers was the lone figure that Uldyssian would have recognized, the gaunt baritone, Nurzani.

“Kethuus,” intoned the skeletal mage, his deep-sunken eyes darting between his comrade and Uldyssian. “Stand away quickly!”

“Nurzani! What—”

The new arrivals raised medallions and staves in Uldyssian’s direction. Kethuus held up a hand in protest, but Nurzani gestured impatiently, and the dark man suddenly vanished from Uldyssian’s side. A moment later, he appeared behind the other mage.

“Now,” Nurzani commanded.

But before they could do whatever it was they intended to a stunned Uldyssian, there came a rush of water that caught the attention of all. From out of it flew a flood of ivory-colored objects varying in size and shape. In less than the blink of an eye, they gathered between the circle of mages and their intended target.

A familiar and very welcome voice resounded through the tunnels. “Uldyssian! To me!”

Mendeln! There was no one whose appearance could have gladdened Uldyssian’s heart more. Nevertheless, he hesitated a moment, as startled as the others by what his brother had clearly wrought.

A wall formed of *bone* not only prevented the mages from reaching Uldyssian but momentarily deflected whatever spells they were attempting. The bones themselves were of many origins, from obvious scraps dropped from the world above to those of the types of creatures that lived off the garbage—and one another. There were also human bones, far too many human bones, a grim reminder of not only the city’s lengthy history but the violent aspects of it throughout the generations.

Mendeln had attempted something like this in the past, but not nearly on so grand a scale. The macabre wall shimmered under the mages’ onslaught, but it held.

Kethuus appeared to be shouting a protest to Nurzani, but the other spellcaster was clearly disinclined to listen to him. The skeletal figure

reached into a pouch.

Frustration surged through Uldyssian, frustration quickly shifting to outrage. These mages now attacked him without giving any cause. He could only assume that they had planned betrayal all along.

His outrage stirred his power. He felt it strain to be unleashed and saw no reason why not.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. Teeth bared, he turned to find his brother.

“Stand away, Mendeln!” Uldyssian growled. “They’ve brought this on themselves.”

“No,” his sibling replied soberly. “They have very good reasons for hating you.”

Mendeln’s statement caught Uldyssian by surprise. He started to protest—but his brother, eyes narrowing, suddenly looked behind him.

“No!” He thrust something into Uldyssian’s palm, then shouted a word that the elder son of Diomedes could not understand.

The tunnel was momentarily filled with searing light, and then whatever Mendeln had given his sibling emitted a glow of its own.

Uldyssian’s surroundings altered. The tunnels and the burning light vanished. A calming darkness swept over him. He landed on something soft—moist ground. Around him, different sounds arose, the sounds of jungle life.

Still needing to orient himself, Uldyssian dropped to his knees. His breathing calmed and the rage that had engulfed him in the tunnels faded again.

As reason returned, he noticed a faint but comfortable coolness in his hand. There was also a dim glow that reminded him of starlight.

Peering down, Uldyssian discovered Mendeln’s ivory dagger. Even as he eyed it, the faint glow ceased.

Thinking of his brother, Uldyssian twisted around to return the dagger to him...and only then discovered that Mendeln was not with him.

“He was more concerned with you and what you might do,” declared a voice from the opposite direction.

Turning, Uldyssian faced Rathma. “I have to go back for him!”

“Nothing would please me more than to rescue him, especially as it was my lapse that allowed him to be manipulated into following you to Kehjan.” The cloaked figure approached. “But if you return to the tunnels and confront the mages, there will be no hope whatsoever of healing what may already be beyond our abilities to mend.”

As usual, Uldyssian understood very little of what the Ancient meant. He only knew that his brother was among enemies after

seeking to rescue *him*. “I’m going back!”

Rathma shook his head. “Uldyssian, you are not aware of what has taken place these past few hours. The mage council and many of the leading guild masters—all gathered to meet with you—were brutally slaughtered.”

The news struck Uldyssian like a rock. “Slaughtered? How?”

“By one of their own...who claims she did it in your name. They seek her, too, but more to the point, you are now declared a fiendish murderer whose followers must also be put down. The mage clans—nay, the entire capital—rise up to war upon the edyrem.”

It was the nightmare that the son of Diomedes had feared early on but was certain that he could prevent from ever happening. He did not have to ask who was behind it. Inarius, naturally. Inarius—and for some reason, the demon lord Diablo likely had a part in the matter.

And then there was this female mage who, no doubt through the angel or the demon or both, had wielded such might as could brutally slay seasoned spellcasters. He suspected that it had been Amolia—but not truly her. She was not the type easily turned.

Malic had a new body and evidently a pact with those seeking Uldyssian’s downfall.

Yet his concern for himself was minimal. Uldyssian held up Mendeln’s dagger, intending to use it to help him return to his brother or even bring him back. However, the dagger looked different from any time he had seen it previously. It was pale in a more ominous manner, pale and lifeless.

The Ancient shook his head. “I feared as much. When I sensed you but not him, I feared the worst.”

“Stop speaking in riddles, and help me do something!”

“But there is nothing you can do for Mendeln,” Rathma said with utter calm. “Nothing you can do for him at all. Look at the blade. The link between him and it is cut.” He bowed his head. “Your brother is lost to us.”

Fourteen

Is this death? Mendeln asked himself. *Is this it?*

If it was, it was far less than he had imagined. Of course, imagination and truth did not always cross paths or even travel within the same world. Still, Mendeln would have thought that there was more—considering what he had witnessed while alive—than this utter emptiness. He could see nothing, could touch nothing, and did not even know if he had anything reminiscent of his old corporeal form.

His mind raced back to the events in the tunnel. Through the guidance of the other angel, he had not only entered the city swiftly and without notice by its guardians—physical or magical—but been then able to use his own blood tie and the skills Rathma and the dragon had taught him to find his brother. Unfortunately, retrieving Uldyssian had not been as simple a matter as he had hoped.

What had brought about the situation in which he had found himself when finally locating his brother, Mendeln knew better than most. The *ghosts* had come to him, of course, the ghosts of dead spellcasters and guild leaders. More than usual, these spirits had been eager to impart upon him the cause of their murder. Mendeln knew the details as well as if he had been there himself, and he knew without a doubt that the woman, Amolia, was not what she seemed. Indeed, when the ghosts had verified this, they had done so in the worst possible manner.

They had revealed to him that it was by *his* doing that all this calamity and bloodshed had happened. They had revealed this by telling him the story Uldyssian had claimed as truth.

The dread spirit of the high priest, Malic, had been responsible for all the heinous deaths.

Somehow, he had escaped the bone fragment to which he had been bound by Mendeln and now, like some terrible disease, spread from one victim to the next. Worse, if Mendeln's suspicions were correct, all the deaths caused by the specter's continued existence were merely incidental as he pursued the one body he truly coveted: Uldyssian's.

Filled with guilt by the horror he had unleashed upon others, only one thing had suddenly mattered to Mendeln. He had to get his brother out of the capital, where he was certain Malic still lurked. For a time, though, the search had gone nowhere. It had been as if Uldyssian did not exist at all, but in the end, Mendeln had finally

managed to locate him. His mistake had been seeking above when his sibling had been below.

And sure enough, he had found Uldyssian, but in the midst of a group of vengeful hunters who would not be willing to listen to reason. There had been no hesitation on Mendeln's part. The spell creating the wall of bone had been driven by his fear for his brother, and the results had astounded him as much as they had the mages and likely even his brother.

But then, when Uldyssian had not only refused to leave but appeared ready to strike back—and become the very evil the Kehjani thought him to be—Mendeln saw no recourse. He had abandoned the other spell and instead cast one that he hoped would take his brother from harm. That had meant sacrificing the dagger, but he had not cared.

The spell had worked. Uldyssian had vanished.

And the mages had attacked him as they had intended to attack Uldyssian.

That was the last Mendeln remembered, save for a brief spark of incredible pain. The next instant, he had discovered himself in this *limbo*, for lack of a better word.

If he was dead, then at least he had done what he had most desired. Uldyssian was outside the city and surely safe. That was all that mattered—

His heart jumped as a voice from nowhere and everywhere called, *AWAKEN, MENDELN UL-DIOMED! AWAKEN! THOUGH FOR YOUR SINS, DEATH WOULD BE THE LEAST OF THE PUNISHMENTS YOU DESERVE, YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED.*

The emptiness through which Mendeln had been floating gave way to a glorious chamber of gleaming marble. Uldyssian's brother found himself lying on a soft, elaborate couch. Above him, a vast panorama detailing an idyllic realm populated by beautiful winged figures covered the entire ceiling.

The words, if not the voice itself, had already warned Mendeln just who had him. His wondrous surroundings informed him where that being had taken him.

He leapt to his feet, reaching for the dagger that was no longer there, and found himself standing before a towering figure with wings composed of tendrils of energy who was not the angel in the jungle.

The celestial warrior then rippled as if seen through water and became a being equally anathema to Mendeln: the Prophet.

"Mendeln ul-Diomed," sang the master of the Cathedral of Light. "Once I spoke to your brother, seeking his redemption from his great downfall. He chose the path of sin rather than a return to the light. I

pray for your soul's sake that you do not repeat his error."

Mendeln did not know when this supposed conversation with Uldyssian had taken place, but he could imagine that his sibling had remained defiant. He wondered why Inarius would think him different.

The Prophet gestured, and next to Mendeln materialized a figure that seemed half golden sunlight, half wind. It was neither male nor female and had no legs, but rather what seemed a stream of tendrils akin to those of the angel.

With hands that consisted of only three digits, the being held a glittering tray upon which appeared a goblet made of pure diamond. In the goblet was golden nectar.

"You would do well to refresh yourself, my child, after such a traumatic encounter."

Without hesitation, Mendeln took the goblet from the ethereal servant. The moment he held the cup, the being dissipated. Uldyssian's brother took a sip; *nectar* poorly described the astounding liquid.

He did not fear that something in the drink would make him more susceptible to Inarius's suggestions. The angel did not need so mortal a trick. There was certainly something else to come.

"You would be dead now, you know," the Prophet said with a solemn expression. "They were determined to slay your brother, and when you stole that chance from them, they turned their magic upon you, my child." He steepled his fingers. "You would be dead now...if not for me."

Despite the fact that this was an angel, Mendeln was not sure how much he should believe. He suspected that Inarius could easily manipulate any facts to serve his desires. Still, Mendeln wisely bowed his head and replied, "I thank you for that."

The Prophet nodded approvingly at his attitude. "Your brother would do well to learn from your manners. Such sinful arrogance will only destroy him. I know that you would not wish that."

They were coming closer to whatever it was Inarius wanted of him. Mendeln chose to play along, especially since he saw no other choice at the moment.

"You have seen into death, Mendeln ul-Diomed, in ways no other mortal has. You have begun this unique journey in great part due to the influence of my errant offspring. It is something that he should have never done."

There were times, too, when Mendeln had thought the very same thing, yet he could not have turned back. The path upon which he had been led was now as much a part of him as breathing.

“But I do not think it the influence of him alone,” continued the angel, his youthful aspect revealing at last a hint of an emotion Mendeln would hardly have expected.

Anxiety.

“No...my son is not the fount of knowledge from which you both draw. There is another, and you know who it is.”

Mendeln tried to fight down his sudden fear. Inarius knew about Trag’Oul!

He suddenly worried that by thinking of the dragon, he had verified for Inarius the truth, but oddly, the angel gave no sign that he had sensed anything. In fact, Inarius continued to appear anxious.

The Prophet’s first words came back to him, and Mendeln realized that his captor had not actually responded to the mortal’s curiosity over whether he was dead or not but had merely started out their conversation in the most logical manner the situation warranted. Anyone in Mendeln’s state would have wondered if he had been slain and Inarius had used that to press his point about how much the son of Diomedes owed him.

But not even his life was worth betraying the dragon, for Mendeln knew that Trag’Oul’s efforts to protect Sanctuary far outweighed whatever contribution the human had made. Certain that Inarius would punish him severely for defying him, Mendeln nonetheless kept silent before the robed figure.

Yet, while there was some discernible anger, the Prophet did not strike him down. Mendeln observed with morbid fascination that Inarius more and more displayed human emotions. So long among men, the angel could not help picking up some of their ways, even if he himself perhaps did not acknowledge it.

There was now clearly tension in the angel’s manner as he proclaimed, “Denial of the truth is also a sin, my child. Do you wish to condemn yourself by not stating what we both know? Such foolishness!”

The last vestiges of uncertainty concerning whether or not Inarius could read his thoughts vanished. Mendeln could only assume that Trag’Oul had managed to create some mental shield that Inarius could not penetrate.

Mendeln swallowed the last of his drink as he tried not to think of what his captor might attempt in order to break that shield. Then he wondered why Inarius would even bother. After all, the Prophet already knew about the dragon.

However, Inarius continued to grow furious. With a single gesture, he sent Mendeln’s goblet the way of the servant. With a scowl, he raised Mendeln himself up into the air until the human nearly floated

among the winged figures in the vast mural.

“Repent for your past misdeeds, Mendeln ul-Diomed, and admit the truth we both know. *He* is here! *He* is the one who guides you from the shadows. Speak his name! It is *Tyrael*. Tyrael! Admit it now!”

Tyrael! The mage’s assault had obviously left Mendeln momentarily disoriented for him to have forgotten the one who had truly instigated this particular quest. Because of the second angel, Mendeln had even willingly abandoned the edyrem, an act for which he felt little guilt. After all, it had been for his brother’s sake.

Tyrael. Of course, the Prophet would be concerned about one of his own kind in his very midst.

Inarius’s voice boomed like thunder, but it was not the only sound deafening the son of Diomedes. There was also, oddly enough, the flapping of many huge wings. In fact, the flapping grew to dominate all other sounds. The unseen wings made such noise that they drove Mendeln to tears.

Something tore at his arm. A hand, small but with sharp nails. A second ripped at his shoulder. There then came another and another...

And through his bleary eyes, Mendeln saw he was being attacked by the images from the huge mural. More than a dozen already assailed him, and others were in the process of tearing themselves free in order to join the first. They were literally as they looked in the painting, and when one turned to the side, Mendeln saw that it had *no* depth.

Mendeln tried to bat them away, but there were too many. They clawed at his face, tore at his breast. Despite their thinness, when he sought to punch through them, his fist met what felt like stone.

As they swarmed around him, they took up the Prophet’s demand. *Speak his name! Tyrael! Speak it! Admit that he is the one!*

Even then, even when it seemed so easy just to agree with Inarius, Mendeln held back. Not being certain who all his enemies were did more to disorient Rathma’s father than anything else Uldyssian’s brother could imagine. Even if that meant torture and death, Mendeln at least could hope that he gave the others a better chance.

Without warning, the winged figures suddenly pulled back. Recovering, Mendeln watched as they returned to their positions in the mural. He expected Inarius to let him fall to the floor, but instead, the Prophet brought him down gently astride the couch.

“I am so very sorry, my child,” Inarius said, his expression now piteous. “So very, very sorry that you wish to continue to sin as you do. I did what I could to try to persuade you to come back to the light, but, like your misbegotten brother, you would rather choose the darkness.” The pity transformed into condemnation. “And so, into the

darkness you shall be cast.”

The vast marble chamber twisted around Mendeln as if turned fluid. The couch upon which Mendeln had landed became a vast, sucking hole. Uldyssian’s brother let out a cry of dismay as he fought in vain to keep from being drawn into it.

“A pity...” was the last he heard the Prophet speak.

It seemed to Mendeln that he was to fall forever, but then, at last, he landed hard on what seemed stone. The collision knocked the air from his lungs and the sense from his head. Mendeln had no idea where he was.

And then a woman’s voice from somewhere in the darkness stirred him to waking. “Who is it? Who’s there? Tell me! Tell me!”

The first thing out of Mendeln’s mouth was a low moan. That instigated movement from the direction of the new voice. A figure leaned over him, close but not touching.

“Who are you? How did you get here?”

Mendeln rolled over to face the shadowed woman. She wore a cloak of some sort, and what little he could see of her consisted of blond hair and what he suspected was a fairly attractive face. That, though, immediately put him in mind of Lilith, and he shoved himself away from the figure.

She, too, recoiled. “Who are you?” the woman demanded again. “Are you a mage?”

The voice did not sound at all like Lilith’s, but Mendeln knew that a demon could change voices at will. Still, it finally registered on him that Lilith was dead, killed by his brother. This was someone else and, considering that Mendeln suspected that he was again in the capital, probably one of those Master Cyrus had said the false Lylia resembled.

He steadied himself. “No. I am no mage.” There was no sense in trying to explain just *what* he was. “My name is Mendeln.”

There was a brief intake of breath, then a momentary silence. The woman finally murmured, “Praise be! I feared it was one of those murderous mages. They’re everywhere! They’re hunting down anyone who’s been helping a man called Uldyssian.”

“Uldyssian!” Mendeln could scarcely believe his luck, especially considering that Inarius had been the one to cast him here.

That thought immediately made him cautious again. It was probable that the angel wanted Uldyssian’s brother caught up in the mages’ sweep, although how exactly that helped Inarius was another question.

“You sound as if you know him,” the woman said, a hint of hope in her tone. She edged closer. “I heard that he had a brother named Mendeln. Are you he?”

“Yes.” He wondered if the Prophet had erred when he had cast his prisoner here. This looked more to Mendeln’s advantage. If the woman had had contact with Uldyssian, then there was perhaps a way by which he could use her link to his sibling to find him.

But that would involve explaining to her that despite not being a mage, he was still a spellcaster of sorts. The loss of his dagger would—

The dagger! Mendeln could not believe his addled thoughts. He had used the dagger to send his brother to safety. He did not even need the woman’s aid! What a fool he had been. The dagger was bound to him; all he had to do was reach out to it and, thus, to Uldyssian.

“Listen to me,” he said in his most reassuring tone. “Uldyssian is safe outside the city—”

“Outside? How can that be?”

Here he had to be careful. “You must trust me when I say that I am not part of the mage clans, but I do know a magic of sorts. I was able to send him to safety just before the mages would have attacked. There is a blade I use that was able to send him beyond the city walls.”

“And this blade...you have it now?”

“No. It is with him.” Mendeln began preparing himself for the effort. “It may be—I think—that I can reach Uldyssian through the blade and either have it bring us to him or perhaps have him do so. Yes, he might be able to cast such a spell also.”

She stood next to him. “All that power. Amazing!”

“I cannot promise for certain that it will work,” he was quick to add.

“But it must!”

Trying to calm his companion, Mendeln replied, “It has great hope of succeeding, I think.” He hesitated. Then, to keep her from thinking of failure, he asked, “What is your name?”

“A-Amolia.”

“I will not leave you here, have no fear of that.”

She reached a hand toward him. “I know.”

Mendeln shivered and, without at first realizing it, pulled his shoulder away from her oncoming fingers. He blinked, then stared at the shadowed woman.

“I *know* you!” he rasped, astounded and dismayed. “I know you!”

“Oh, yes, you do,” she replied, closing on him. Only now was it apparent that the shadows somewhat obscuring her features were stronger than natural. This close, Mendeln, whose vision was better than that of a cat, should have been able to make her out perfectly, and yet only with effort could he see a bit more. Amolia did remind him of Lyia, as he had thought, but there was one significantly

different feature that marred her otherwise attractive features.

Dark lesions covered her face.

No...not her face anymore. How he could sense the truth was something that perhaps Rathma could have explained. This was not a woman called Amolia...not anymore.

This was the spirit of the high priest Malic possessing her body.

How this nightmare had come to be was impossible for him to say, but now he knew why Inarius had cast him here. That the angel would make use of a fiend such as Malic did not entirely surprise him.

The false Amolia grabbed his shoulder. "How appropriate that you should be the one to finally give your brother to me."

Mendeln felt an emptiness press at him. It was almost as if he were being cast out of his body.

Not sure what else he could do, he muttered the first words he could think of in the ancient tongue.

Malic cried out as a white light erupted where his hand touched. As the specter pulled the appendage back, both could see that it was blackened as if burned—but by cold, not by heat.

"Impossible!" the high priest raged, his inhuman fury distorting the woman's face further. "Impossible!"

Recovering from his own surprise, Mendeln put on a confident front. "I summoned you from the dead, Malic! You cannot touch me, but I can send you back to whatever damned pit you belong."

The woman's face continued to contort, but now to a different emotion. To his further astonishment, Uldyssian's brother recognized that emotion: *fear*.

Malic was afraid, possibly for the first time from anyone other than his masters.

But fear alone was not enough, especially if this parasitic ghost desired to shed his current victim for Uldyssian. Mendeln thrust a hand out toward the demonic shade.

"No more!" he growled at Malic. "It is time you died again...this time forever!"

The words he needed came rushing from his lips.

With a garbled cry, Malic seized a medallion hanging from his host's neck. Too late did Mendeln understand just what the shade intended.

Malic vanished.

"No!" The younger son of Diomedes desperately finished his incantation—which, with no target, simply ceased to happen.

Where the high priest had vanished to, he could not say. Malic had acted in panic, and that meant it was possible that even the specter did not know where he had sent himself. Mendeln wished that Malic

had by sheer bad fortune cast himself among the hunting mages, the only part of his story that had sounded believable. At this point, they likely would have known him for something vile.

But he could not rely on that. Mendeln had to make amends for the monster he had unleashed upon the world. He had to find Malic and finish him.

First, though, Mendeln had to find his brother. He had to know that Uldyssian was actually all right.

The plan he had intended before discovering Malic's presence was still sound. Mendeln refocused, seeking out the dagger with his mind. Surely, Uldyssian still had it with him. Mendeln prayed that it was so.

A heavy force bowled him to the floor. He sensed several figures begin to coalesce around him. Mendeln knew exactly who they were. The mages had no doubt noticed his magical confrontation with Malic and reacted accordingly. Now, instead of Uldyssian or the ghost, they would find themselves with a different prize.

Head pounding, Mendeln tried to finish his spell, but he could not.

Hands roughly seized him and then let go as shouts filled the shadowed chamber. A moon-silver light briefly enveloped everything.

Again, a pair of hands took hold, but this time more gently.

The silvery light momentarily blinded Mendeln, and then the sounds of the jungle prevailed.

"Be at ease," came Rathma's weary voice. "He is unharmed."

At first, Mendeln believed that the Ancient spoke to him, but then came a welcome second voice. "I could've gotten him myself, Rathma! I could've!"

Mendeln's vision cleared. He beheld Uldyssian, his brother, still clutching Mendeln's ivory dagger. The older sibling stared with wild eyes.

"The dagger was dead," Uldyssian muttered to Mendeln. "I thought you were dead...and then it flared to life again."

"I was a guest of the Prophet," the younger brother revealed. "Likely, that was why the dagger and I had no link." Mendeln saw no need to mention having suffered through a similar situation before finding Uldyssian in the tunnels.

Uldyssian cursed. "I knew it! I told you, Rathma. I told you I should've been the one to go."

"But if you had gone back," Inarius's son answered, "there is little doubt that my father or his so-called ally would have been waiting."

"That's precisely—"

"Or worse," Mendeln interrupted, testing his balance. "Malic."

"Malic?" Uldyssian faltered. "You saw him?"

"*Her*, at least at the moment. A female mage named Amolia, I think

it was.”

Uldyssian nodded gravely. “I’d wondered what had caused the mage clans to turn on me without hearing me out.”

Rathma shook his head at Mendeln, a hint of disappointment in his otherwise emotionless countenance. “What I revealed to you must always be wielded with caution. The variations on your teachings that you have accomplished are to be marveled at, but in the way one would marvel at the jaws of a great beast held from ripping you apart by a thin strand of hair binding it to a wall.”

“I am brutally aware of my deficiencies,” Mendeln muttered. “I—and only I—will deal with them and him.”

His declaration did not go unchallenged. “No,” Uldyssian interjected. “Malic’s mine.”

“You are susceptible to his touch; I am not, as I have discovered.”

The argument might have gone further, but Rathma unexpectedly said, “The situation regarding the malevolent Malic just might be of no true concern, I fear. In fact, nothing that we have struggled against for so long or so hard might matter whatsoever.”

He had the brothers’ complete attention. Uldyssian it was who dared to ask the question to which neither wished to hear the answer. “Why? Why is Malic—or, more important, *Inarius*—no longer something to fear?”

“Because they, too, may be swept away like the most insignificant vermin by the cataclysm that even now hovers just on the horizon.” Rathma shook his head. “The celestial warriors of the High Heavens are approaching Sanctuary. They come to eliminate it and all upon it as abominations that should never have existed.” A grim smile crossed his pale features. “They will make my father seem benevolent by comparison.”

“We’ll fight them just as we’ve been fighting him,” Uldyssian immediately declared. “With or without the mage clans, we’ll fight them.”

“And very likely lose, unless we do the unthinkable.”

“What’s that?”

Rathma shivered. “Why, join forces with my father, naturally.”

Fifteen

“Make a pact with Inarius?” Uldyssian could scarcely believe his ears, and from the look of his brother, neither could Mendeln. Uldyssian wondered if perhaps the centuries had finally caught up with the Ancient. His mind had surely gone. How else to explain such a mad suggestion?

“One might as well deal with Diablo, I know...and we may yet have to do that. I would willingly accept any other suggestion, but in the light of things, I see no other course.”

“No!” Mendeln stepped between them. “There is another chance. Another angel. Tyrael.”

“Is the very reason that the High Heavens now descend upon Sanctuary. Do not think that my father or the demons are alone in their mastery of manipulation. Tyrael—and it dismays me yet to hear you verify that it is he who is here—would see no contradiction in his role as a warrior of light by twisting his words and leading you and likely Achilios to believe him kindly and benevolent!” Rathma’s cloak fluttered almost nervously, an effect more pronounced by the fact that there was no wind. “All he has desired during his time here is to create more chaos that will keep those interested in the world’s survival at one another’s throats, the easier for them to be judged by the High Heavens and erased from existence.”

“Not possible!” Mendeln blurted. “I spoke with him. He was concerned over Inarius’s madness and the fear that demons were gaining control over humanity. He—”

“The truth can hide many lies within it.” The Ancient’s shoulders slumped. “To Tyrael, we would be monsters, things that should have never existed. Therefore, we are not worthy of trust or truth. All that matters is our annihilation, so that we do not blemish creation. No... we must seek alliance with my father, and quickly.”

Uldyssian could not believe that they would get anywhere with the Prophet. There had to be another way. “What about the dragon? Can’t he do anything?”

“He has. He warned me of the High Heavens coming.”

“And that’s all? He’ll do nothing else?”

Rathma glared. “I did not say he would remain idle. Even now, he attempts to blind them to Sanctuary’s true location. And if that fails, he will try to bar their way with his power.”

But judging by Rathma's tone, it sounded unlikely that Trag'Oul would succeed.

There was one other question that bothered Uldyssian, and that concerned Inarius himself. "Why does this other angel go through such subterfuge? Is your father so powerful?"

"By himself not, but he has tied his essence to the Worldstone and draws upon it like a leech. It has made him far, far stronger, such that even the Three will deal cautiously with him."

"Diablo!" Suddenly, what had happened to Uldyssian in the capital's water system could be seen in a different light. "He tried to trick me into allowing him into my mind—or my soul! I fought him off, though."

"The Lord of Terror was in Kehjan?" Inarius's son considered. "I have this terrible feeling that there is more going on there."

"Much more," agreed Mendeln. "For it was the Prophet who sent me to Malic!"

It was impossible not to draw the only logical conclusion. The master demon in the city. Inarius tied to Malic. The sinister creature in the tunnels. "They've a pact," Uldyssian muttered. "Those three had a pact." He shook his head in disbelief. "And it included the slaughter of most of those who actually rule Kehjan!"

"Ah, how Tyrael would laugh...if he laughs at all." Rathma spat. "So, either by his manipulation or by the plots of my father and the demon lord, all is falling into place for the High Heavens. The greatest city on Sanctuary, the nexus of power that might have stood, at least for a time, against an army of angels, is in utter chaos. It is made more ironic in that I am certain that neither Inarius nor Diablo sees the matter as anything more than the chess game between themselves."

The thought was a sober one, for it now made it even more unlikely that Inarius would hear reason.

Uldyssian started, realizing that he had suddenly begun considering an alliance with the Prophet something desirable.

"Will he speak with us?" he finally dared asked.

Apparently, he even surprised Rathma with his change of heart, for the Ancient eyed him for a moment before answering. "It may be that he will...though what that will lead to could be not at all what we wish."

Meaning that Inarius was just as likely to try to kill them as to listen.

"If there is to be any hope of approaching him, though," continued the angel's son, "it must be me who does it. The bond between us is tenuous but better than the feud between you and him."

It was not how Uldyssian would have preferred it, but he saw the

truth of Rathma's words. "How'll you do it?"

"I will simply go and speak with him...and now, in fact."

And with that, Rathma vanished.

Startled, Uldyssian reached out a hand to the Ancient but was too slow. "Damn him! There's more we needed to discuss!"

"Indeed," returned Mendeln. "What do we do about Achilios? He serves this angel unwittingly or unwillingly, but he serves him nevertheless."

There was no question in Uldyssian's mind what to do. "We act in whatever way necessary to see to it that the edyrem are all safe. That means we return to them immediately." He gestured for his brother to draw near, in the process returning the dagger. "And if that means we have to fight this Tyrael, then so be it."

Mendeln only nodded. Uldyssian thought of Serenthia and the others. He sensed their general presence not all that far from the siblings, yet it was all but impossible to specifically locate Cyrus's daughter.

And as Uldyssian concentrated, he worried what that might mean for her.

They vanished from their location and reappeared instantly among the edyrem. Startled shouts arose from those around them as the sons of Diomedes materialized. Wary of accidental attacks, Uldyssian shielded the pair—a good thing, since a moment later, a fireball sought to incinerate them.

"Stop!" cried Saron from somewhere. A moment later, the Torajian fell on one knee before Uldyssian. "You are back! We had feared the worst, Master Uldyssian!"

"I also, Saron." Uldyssian patted the shorter man on the shoulder, then quickly surveyed those around him. "Where's Serenthia?"

"I have not seen her in some hours. To be honest, Master Uldyssian, I was concerned, but she did once touch my mind and say that she was preparing the way for us."

"And what does that mean?"

The Torajian shrugged. "At the time, I assumed that she referred to our march on the capital. We—we sought to rescue you."

"For which I'm grateful." Uldyssian concentrated harder, but still he could not sense Serenthia.

However, he did note something else to the north, something that reminded him of Achilios.

Thoughts racing ahead, Uldyssian absently said, "Stay with them, Mendeln. Do what you can."

"Uldyssian! Do not—"

But it was already too late. Uldyssian left the edyrem, materializing

instead in the jungle to the north. His eyes adjusted to the dark surroundings...but not soon enough.

The invisible force struck him like a battering ram, sending Uldyssian flying. If not for the son of Diomedes taking the precaution of shielding himself even before he arrived, he would have been very dead. As it was, Uldyssian crashed through first one thick trunk, then another, completely shattering both. The third finally stopped his flight, but not without nearly cracking in two.

He was not even given time to recover. Two arrows struck him, and despite the fact that they should have been far less of a threat than the magic, one *penetrated* his protection. Fortunately, it was slowed enough that it left only a shallow wound...a wound directly over his heart.

He tore the arrow from him, then rolled to the side. Uldyssian knew that a trap had been set for him. It had been no mistake that he had sensed Achilios but not Serenthia. That had enabled her to strike before he could orient himself.

But why they were trying to kill him was not entirely clear. The angel who manipulated them played a game nearly as twisted as Inarius's. Achilios had managed to avoid successfully assassinating him earlier yet now seemed quite convinced that Uldyssian had to perish.

What was the point, though? Rathma had said that the hosts of the High Heavens were bearing down on Sanctuary. Why, then, did this Tyrael wish to bother with one particular human, no matter how powerful?

In asking that question, Uldyssian realized that he knew the answer.

But what mattered most was stopping this madness. He leapt to his feet. "Serenthia! Achilios! It's me! It's—"

Another tree bent over and sought to smother him in its thick foliage. As Uldyssian began ripping his way free, blue flames engulfed the branches.

The heat momentarily seared him. Sweating, Uldyssian waved a hand and sent a cold blast of air all around him. The flames died instantly, the blackened branches and leaves a dread reminder of what had been intended for Uldyssian.

Despite his concern for both his friends, he was also fast becoming angry. Serenthia and Achilios had come much too close to actually harming him. They were not even giving him an opportunity to try to tell them the truth. What did they think of him that they wanted his death so badly?

Strengthening his shields, he took a step forward and tried once

more to talk reason. “Serry! We need to speak. The angel with you is as deadly as Inarius. Perhaps deadlier. He wants to destroy the entire world—”

“Spare us your pretense, high priest!” came her voice. “We know what you are and what you’ve done. By Uldyssian’s memory, we’ll make you regret all the lives you’ve stolen, especially his!”

He cursed, understanding at last what—or, rather, *who*—they thought him to be.

Malic.

How the angel had managed that, Uldyssian did not know. Still, what mattered was that the son of Diomedes now knew just why the two were so adamant about killing him.

And there was no manner by which he could think to convince them that he was himself.

The spear caught him under the ribs. Distracted by Serenthia’s revelation, Uldyssian had left himself open. His shields should have still held, but as he fell back, wounded, Uldyssian had no doubt that Tyrael had done something to assist the weapon in reaching its target. That also would have explained the arrow’s luck earlier.

Pain coursed through him. His head pounded. He gripped the spear and burned it to ash. Panting, Uldyssian put a hand over the wound, healing it.

His frustration mounted. He could not just stand there, letting them take chance after chance to slay him. The overall situation was far more important than this fight. Uldyssian had to put an end to things...even if it meant harming one or both of them in the process.

Or even doing something worse.

He straightened—and immediately, another arrow raced toward him. This time, though, Uldyssian had been expecting it. He threw his power first into reducing the bolt to ash, then striking where the archer had surely stood.

The trees and undergrowth for yards ahead flattened under the force of his spell. A scream arose, but it was feminine and came from another direction.

“No!” Serenthia shouted. She leapt out of the jungle, hands raised toward Uldyssian. The trees he had just flattened went soaring back at him.

He managed to deflect the first few, but while that was happening, Serenthia summoned a new spear and threw. Uldyssian managed to catch the spear just inches from him, then tossed it point first into the soil.

As it struck, a wall of dirt erupted. It rose several yards and immediately solidified.

Tree after tree slammed into the wall, but, strengthened by Uldyssian's power, the dirt barrier held. The makeshift missiles struck with what sounded like a thunderclap.

Before Serenthia could attempt anything else, Uldyssian slapped the air in her direction. It struck the merchant's daughter as if he had actually hit her himself. With a groan, she fell backward.

Taking a deep breath, the son of Diomedes looked around. Sensing no other threat, he rushed to Serenthia's side.

She lay sprawled amidst the ruined undergrowth, her head tilted to one side in a manner that at first made Uldyssian fear that he had injured her badly. However, a quick study revealed nothing threatening.

The merchant's daughter moaned. Her eyes opened, and she saw Uldyssian leaning over her.

An epithet worthy of a demon escaped her lips. She tried to move, tried to use her power, but Uldyssian had already prepared for that. Serenthia quickly found that she could do nothing.

"Please be calm, Serry," he murmured, deciding that calling her by her childhood name might serve to alleviate her suspicions. In truth, her expression did immediately grow confused, yet the wariness did not completely disappear. "It's me—it's Uldyssian, I swear!"

"No...he said...I *saw* the carnage in the capital. He showed us what happened...and that it was *Malic's* ghost seizing body after body...including yours!"

"The angel lied," he bluntly replied.

"But...no..." Her eyes shifted ever so slightly.

Uldyssian sensed the figure behind him but made no move. Instead, the former farmer muttered, "At this close range, you should be able to hit me dead on, Achilios."

"And if he even tries," remarked yet another voice, "I shall send him back to where he came from."

"Mendeln?" Serenthia gasped.

With the utmost care and casualness, Uldyssian looked behind him. As he had noted, the pale figure of the archer stood right behind him. A few leaves still clung to the undead's body. Achilios had another dirt-encrusted shaft ready to fire, but even as Uldyssian watched, his childhood friend lowered his bow.

Just barely visible behind Achilios, Mendeln held the ivory dagger point down. The mystical weapon glowed faintly like moonlight.

"Mendeln..." rasped the hunter. "You...you don't know...the truth...This is...is not Uldyssian! This is that...that creature...Malic!"

"No, this is my brother," Mendeln replied calmly. "I would know Malic if I saw him, no matter what the body. I've learned that."

“But—”

“The angel lied to both of you,” Uldyssian interjected. “He used you for pawns.” As he spoke, he released Serenthia from her invisible bonds. She eyed the hand he offered her with suspicion but finally grasped it.

“I believe it’s actually him, Achilios,” Serenthia said. “I really do.”

Her admission only seemed to anger the archer. “He nearly made... made me...do it again! I almost...killed you!”

Mendeln joined them. Keeping the glowing dagger by his side, he added, “I do not know if the angel wanted Uldyssian dead even now. I think that he is merely maximizing chaos wherever he can in preparation for the coming of the armed host.”

Both Serenthia and Achilios looked at the brothers in total bewilderment.

“What armed host?” the hunter asked.

Uldyssian explained. His friends’ expressions transformed swiftly to horror as understanding hit them hard.

“All of the world?” the dark-tressed woman exclaimed. “Nothing... no one left?”

“If Tyrael and the angels have their way. The other alternative seems to be enslavement by the demons...or by Inarius.”

“This can’t be happening. That means all we’ve done has been for nothing, Uldyssian!”

He shook his head. “No, Serry. I won’t believe that. I plan on fighting until the end. This is our world, not Inarius’s, the angels’, or the demons’!”

“What of...of Rathma?” asked Achilios grimly. “Can he...can he persuade Inarius...to join with us? Is that...even possible?”

“Is that even desired?” Uldyssian retorted. He vehemently shook his head. “I think Rathma’s doomed to failure, but he’s got to try—and in the meantime, we need to prepare.”

“For the angels’ coming,” Mendeln concluded.

But Uldyssian shook his head again. “No—no, I think first for Inarius, actually.”

* * *

Rathma had never been inside the Cathedral of Light, but he had heard tales of it. It was everything those tales had said, but despite that, he was not in the least impressed. All the glory, all the grandeur, focused around the megalomania of his father, not good, as it pretended.

The guards lining the corridors did not see him walk among them,

nor did even the senior priests. He had not sought to materialize directly in Inarius's sanctum, for his father would have taken that for a sign of disrespect. While Rathma did indeed have no respect for the angel, he felt that now was not the time to push that particular point.

The zealous guards stationed at the doorway to the Prophet's sanctum stared as blindly as the rest. The cowed figure strode right past them and, a moment later, *through* the doors themselves.

Rathma did not announce himself as he entered the vast, elegant chamber. Inarius knew full well that his offspring was there.

Indeed, a moment later, the voice Rathma so despised echoed through his head and heart. *MY WAYWARD SON...AND HAVE YOU COME TO BEG FORGIVENESS FOR YOUR SINS?*

The angel materialized in his full, grand glory just a few feet above Rathma. His wings were spread wide across the chamber, the full spectrum of their energies filling the marble room with an astounding array of colors. Despite himself, Rathma had to admire the beauty inherent in what his father was, if nothing else.

"You can spare us both that constant question, can you not, Father?"

BUT IF THAT IS NOT THE REASON, THEN WHAT? WHEN LAST WE SPOKE, YOU REJECTED FOREVER THE LINK BETWEEN US. THEREFORE, IF YOU DO NOT SEEK FORGIVENESS, I SEE NO REASON FOR ANY FURTHER AUDIENCE.

"There is a very good reason, and you know it!" the Ancient said, his vast cloak fluttering. He raised a fist toward the angel. "The whole of Sanctuary is in imminent threat of destruction. There is only one hope to save it—"

COMBINE MY MIGHT WITH THAT OF THE HERETIC ULDYSSIAN AND HIS RABBLE, NOT TO MENTION YOURS AND PERHAPS WHATEVER HANDFUL OF THE FIRSTBORN STILL HIDE UNDER THE ROCKS? Inarius's disdain was clear in his tone. PERHAPS ADD EVEN THE BURNING HELLS TO OUR RANKS? OR MAYBE THE SO-CALLED MAGE CLANS?

As he spoke, the angel glowed ever more brilliantly, so much so that Rathma had to shield his eyes. Rathma struggled against the ever-present urge to kneel before his father. Inarius gestured toward the images in the ceiling, his gauntleted hand twisting as if he sought to grasp each and every one of them.

IN THE HIGH HEAVENS, I WAS ONE AMONG MANY. AGAINST THEIR HOST, I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO STAND. He looked down at his son once more. *BUT WE ARE IN MY WORLD NOW...MY WORLD! ITS LIFE...ITS DEATH...ARE AND HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MINE TO DECIDE, LINARIAN!*

This was turning into a conversation that Rathma and Inarius had had too often already during the ages. The Ancient had always suspected his progenitor of teetering on madness, but now he began to see that the angel was utterly insane.

Nonetheless, Rathma continued to try. “Father, you know that Tyrael has found Sanctuary—”

NO! The winged figure descended to just a few inches above the immaculate floor. *THE PLOY FAILED! THE TRUTH BECAME KNOWN TO ME! TYRAEL IS NOT HERE; TYRAEL WAS NEVER HERE. AND EVEN IF HE WAS, NOT A THOUSAND OF HIM OR ANY OTHER COULD STAND AGAINST ME, SO LONG AS I AM BOUND TO THE WORLDSTONE! NO, LINARIAN, TYRAEL IS NOT HERE. YOUR TRICKS HAVE BEEN UNVEILED TO ME. YOU WORKED IN LEAGUE WITH ALL THE REST. YOU ARE NO MORE TO BE TRUSTED THAN THE LORD DIABLO, WHO THINKS TO BLIND ME TO HIS TREACHERIES BY OFFERING HIS OWN “ALLIANCE.”*

The words verified some of Rathma’s suspicions and fears concerning recent events. “Then...then the slaughter of innocents in the capital is in great part your doing! You have left the mage clans in confusion and anger and made Sanctuary that much more unstable. You play into Tyrael’s hand, do you not see that?”

ALL PLAYS INTO MY HANDS, YOU MEAN. THE CITY IS TURNED AGAINST THE HERETIC, ULDYSSIAN, AS ARE MORE AND MORE OF THE FLOCK THROUGHOUT THE REALM. A very human laugh escaped the celestial being, a laugh filled with mad triumph. THEN LORD DIABLO OFFERS ME WHAT HE BELIEVES WILL IN THE END GARNER HIM DOMINATION OF MY WORLD AND MAKE THE HERETIC’S LEGIONS SOLDIERS FOR DAMNATION. HE PROVIDES ME WITH THE PATH TO THE VERY CHAOS I DESIRE UPON SANCTUARY, THE BETTER TO SWEEP IT CLEAN AND REBUILD IT WITH THE PERFECT ORDER IT WAS MEANT TO HAVE SINCE THE BEGINNING.

Rathma had earlier sensed Uldyssian’s reluctance when the Ancient had suggested seeking a pact with Inarius, and although the angel’s son had expected little, he saw that even Uldyssian had underestimated just how impossible success might be. Rathma’s father lived in a world of his own, but it was not even Sanctuary...it was a fantasy within his own mind.

And because of Inarius’s blind madness, everyone else would suffer.

Rathma made one last, desperate stab. “Father, Tyrael is not—”

He got no farther. Inarius gazed down upon him with eyes that were not even remotely human but blazing energy. At that moment, Rathma realized the gap between even himself and what his sire was. It was a jest of the cosmos that they were father and son; there was more of a physical bond between Rathma and a toadstool.

WHETHER NO TYRAEL OR A THOUSAND THOUSAND TYRAELS,
THIS WORLD IS MINE, LINARIAN! MINE.

A sensation of extreme claustrophobia overwhelmed Rathma. His father swelled in size, rapidly growing into a giant.

No...the entire room matched the angel, which meant that it was the angel's *offspring* who was transforming. Without Rathma even being aware of it, Inarius had shrunken him down to the size of a rat—and then even smaller.

The winged figure alighted, then reached out to his son. A smoky sphere immediately formed around Rathma. The Ancient battered his cage with all the magic he could muster, but for naught. Alone against his father, he was nothing.

The tiny sphere flew up from the floor and onto Inarius's open palm. By the time it did that, it was no larger than a pea.

YOU ARE SO VERY MUCH LIKE YOUR MOTHER, Inarius said. A SHAME, THAT.

With that, he cast the sphere and Rathma into the void.

Sixteen

It was neither Inarius nor the other angels who struck first. That honor went to the city of Kehjan.

The sentries sensed their approach just before dawn the next day, but Uldyssian noted them several minutes before that. He did not immediately tell his followers, or even his friends, instead trying to think of what he could do to prevent so many innocent lives from being lost.

Unfortunately, little came to mind.

When word came from the sentries, all he could do was summon Mendeln and the others he trusted for command and quickly discuss whatever suggestions they might have to stopping the impending disaster. They had barely more to offer than he had and, with the exception of Mendeln, saw no reason to be so concerned over the fate of the Kehjanis.

"You tried to come in peace," Serenthia pointed out. "They never gave you the chance. If not for Malic's evil, there would've been some other reason to betray you. Look how they attacked you even in the palace of Prince Ehmadi!"

"We will crush them easily," Saron piped up.

Jonas nodded agreement, adding, "Once they see they can't win, Master Uldyssian, they'll go running. That'll save a lot of their lives."

"But not enough," the son of Diomedes returned. "Not nearly enough..." He suddenly looked up. "How the angels and demons must be laughing right now." Uldyssian wondered especially about the one identified as Tyrael. This was surely what he desired. Keep all the abominations at one another's throats until his brethren swept down and cleansed the world of them.

And Inarius? Inarius would not be idle. Curiously, Uldyssian was most concerned about him—and the fact that Rathma had not returned. He glanced at Mendeln and saw something in his brother's eyes that indicated the same thoughts had crossed his mind as well.

One of the sentries touched his mind. Uldyssian shoved aside all thought about Inarius...at least for the moment.

"Get everyone ready. Make sure those who need to be protected are. At my signal, we move to meet them." He would not allow his foes to dictate this battle; come what may, Uldyssian would take responsibility for his part in what was to happen.

Saron and Jonas ran off to relay his orders to others. Serenthia started to follow but then faltered. She looked to Uldyssian.

He knew immediately what disturbed her. Achilios had left them during the night, but only to keep the edyrem—from whom he was shielded—from growing disturbed by his presence. However, the hunter had promised that he would be near when the conflict began.

“He’s not far,” Uldyssian reassured her. While the son of Diomedes was in great part responsible for keeping Achilios hidden from everyone else, he maintained a link with his friend that even Serenthia could not create. “He’ll be at our side, so to speak.”

She gave him a grateful nod and raced off.

Mendeln glanced at his brother. “This does not feel right, Uldyssian. In many ways, these people do not deserve what will happen.”

“We can’t do anything about it. It’s out of our hands, Mendeln. We need to defend ourselves, not only for our sakes but for the world’s.”

“But if we slaughter hundreds for no good reason other than that they were blinded by Inarius and others, of what value will that world be?”

Uldyssian shrugged his question off. “That might not even matter.”

He strode off before they could argue. Mendeln followed at his heels, silent. Uldyssian knew that despite his sibling’s words, Mendeln would fight as best he could.

No one would be spared bloodying his hands....

The sky thundered even though the clouds did not warrant it. Mendeln sensed that the mages were beginning what they thought their grand spellwork. The Kehjani were not stupid; they knew the stories of Uldyssian and the edyrem. They knew the tales of Toraja, Istani, and other places where Uldyssian had brought down the Triune. They also had the supposed betrayal in their own ranks, the blame falling on Mendeln’s brother.

The spellcasters would want this over quickly, and the guilds and nobles would back them on this entirely. If this Prince Ehmad was also dead, as Uldyssian suspected, the last vestiges of hope for anything other than war were indeed gone. However the mages struck, it would be fearsome.

And if that failed, an army of thousands was ready to die in the mistaken belief that the edyrem were coming to raze their homes and slaughter their families.

The angels and demons had done their work oh so well.

Despite his understanding of all this, Mendeln summoned what knowledge and power he had gained in preparation for his own efforts

against the Kehjani. He could ill afford to let his doubts keep him from standing beside his brother. No matter what the outcome, nothing was more important.

Now, in addition to the thunder, the trees shook as if caught in a violent wind that neither he nor the edyrem could feel. What Mendeln *could* detect, though, were the magical energies building up before Uldyssian's followers.

But the edyrem were not idle, either. Under the silent direction of their leader, they were combining their wills toward two goals. The first was shielding themselves against whatever it was that the mages intended to throw at them. The second, naturally, had to do with Uldyssian's intentions for striking back. Although he had no idea what his sibling intended, Mendeln shivered at the thought of Uldyssian's retribution. If he should lose control at some point, there was no telling what devastation he might cause.

Something was happening. Whatever it was the mage clans intended to unleash, it was coming. He readied the dagger.

Mendeln! came Trag'Oul's voice. It struck the human like thunder amplified a thousand times. Caught up in their own efforts, the edyrem—even Uldyssian—failed to notice his fall.

Mendeln! repeated the dragon. As he sought to recover, Uldyssian's brother noticed with shock that for the first time since he had been confronted by the creature, Trag'Oul's voice sounded *strained*.

Struggling to keep his head from exploding, Mendeln acknowledged the dragon. Immediately, he felt the celestial being seize upon that acknowledgment. *You must help me, quickly! I can barely keep hold! Come!*

Trag'Oul's words penetrated, especially the last one. Mendeln immediately sought to protest. *I cannot leave Uldyssian! I cannot—*

But his words were for naught.

The ground started to shake. It came as no surprise to Uldyssian, who knew what the mages intended. What was more devastating to any enemy force than an earthquake? Rifts began to open up around the edyrem. Trees toppled over. A wall of dirt arose in the south.

Linked to his followers, Uldyssian drew upon their power as much as his own. With but a glare at the rising ground, he forced it level again. With not even so much as that, he stilled first the trees, then the land beneath the edyrem's feet.

And with a single contemptuous gesture, the son of Diomedes caused the cracks to mend themselves so that they looked as if they had never even been.

Uldyssian appreciated the incredible forces that the mages had put into the creation of their great spell and appreciated more the consternation that likely was going on at that very moment. They had surely expected some injury and death among the edyrem, not this simple shrugging off of their might.

He allowed himself a smile, albeit one with little pleasure in it. Uldyssian hoped that the Kehjanis would realize their hopelessness and retreat, but he did not expect it. The masters of the city would either try something more desperate—and, thus, possibly actually more effective—or simply drive their army into the edyrem's waiting arms.

Either way, the blood was soon to flow.

Uldyssian found himself as impatient with the situation as he was disgusted by it. All that would ultimately happen here would be to waste time and strength against those who were not the true threat. He knew that Mendeln felt that way and understood his brother's earlier reluctance, but what could he really do? Simply put a stop to the oncoming collision between his people and the Kehjani?

The thought so distracted Uldyssian that it made him stumble and nearly lose his link to the others. As he quickly regained his attention, the son of Diomedes considered what he had just so casually asked himself.

Could he somehow keep this battle from happening? It was not as if that would put an end to the conflict. There were both Inarius and this angelic host that was—seemingly still fooled by whatever it was Trag'Oul was doing. Neither of them would be possible for Uldyssian to avoid, especially the Prophet, who had the most to lose or win.

Certain of their impending victory and ignorant of how little it might mean, the edyrem eagerly pressed forward. They were almost at the point of not even being able to be stopped by Uldyssian. He knew, therefore, that he had to do whatever he hoped to do as swiftly as possible.

For that, he needed coordination between those he could best trust. Uldyssian simultaneously reached out to Serenthia and his other trusted commanders, informing them in an instant of his hopes. He received the expected disbelief from many, including even the merchant's daughter.

You may only be opening us up to the mages, she was quick to point out. *This'll definitely put a strain on our own defenses.*

It can't be helped! he shot back. *And it will be done!*

No one argued further with him. The edyrem would live and die by his judgment, a painful understanding on Uldyssian's part. However, there was nothing he could do to change that.

Be my shield, he ordered the others. They willingly obeyed. That allowed Uldyssian to focus on letting his mind separate from his body. He shot forth, his view racing through toward the Kehjani defenders.

It did not take him long to locate the physical aspect of the capital's attack. The soldiers moved in a fine, orderly fashion, but Uldyssian could sense their wariness and even growing anxiety. They knew that something had been attempted by the spellcasters, something that had utterly failed. They also knew that the enemy they approached was responsible somehow for the slaughter of many of their leaders.

But still they came to defend their homes.

That did much to instill in Uldyssian a determination that he would change what was supposed to be. Inarius would not have his bloodbath...at least, not this one.

He flew beyond the marching ranks to where the officers rode, then far past them. Over the walls he dove, then deep into the city's heart. It was there at last that he found the true commanders of the Kehjani force, the mages.

There were twenty, and the colors of their robes indicated that they were of that many different clans. Most were old, but where their bodies were withered, they radiated magic such as Uldyssian had rarely seen.

Most formed a five-sided pattern in the midst of which they were now summoning up fantastic energies that set the stone chamber aglow like a sinister rainbow. A handful of others stood to the side in heated discussion, likely trying to decide just what to do next in the face of such a grand debacle.

Some of those in the second gathering stilled as he neared. They looked about uneasily, perhaps sensing his astral presence. Then an elderly figure with a beard nearly down to the floor snapped his fingers, demanding their return to their conversation.

Those in this chamber were the ones with whom Uldyssian first had to deal. These mages represented the backbone of any fight mustered by the Kehjani. Of course, he did not want to harm them any more than he wished to harm the soldiers; the spellcasters, too, reacted because of treachery.

But what *could* he do that would not demand their deaths? He had little time to think, for it was clear that the mages were nearly ready to strike again. This time, they would try to learn from their mistake. If there were only some way to simply cut them off from the battle.

It was so simple that Uldyssian could not believe he had not thought of it sooner. The only question was whether it was actually *possible*.

There was, of course, only one way to find out.

He withdrew from the building that housed the spellcasters' efforts, surveying as he went all that was taking place nearby. By the time Uldyssian situated himself where he thought best, he knew where all the mages involved were located. It almost made him laugh when he discovered that there were many more spread throughout the areas surrounding the initial groups and that those were involved in creating defenses for the citadel itself. Uldyssian had crossed those defenses without even noticing them or apparently setting any off.

His confidence increased, Uldyssian called upon the others. He wanted to make this work the first time.

They need simply to be contained, he told them. I will guide you.

They fed him their power. He was slightly surprised by how much they gave and realized that it was far more than he even needed. The might of his followers grew by leaps and bounds.

But would it ultimately be enough when the true threat came to Sanctuary?

A swelling of magical energy brought him back to the situation at hand. Reprimanding himself for the distraction, the son of Diomedes stared at the mages' sanctum. Then, imagining his present form had a hand, he cupped it over the distant but foreboding building.

And under his hand, what seemed the upper half of an eggshell took shape over the structure. It grew to encompass all that he desired, then descended. As it did, the shell turned translucent, then invisible.

Uldyssian nodded in satisfaction. He sensed the spellcasters only now noticing that something was amiss. Their consternation rose as they tested what could not be seen but completely enveloped them. They would find that they could not leave by magical or physical means, nor could they make any contact whatsoever with those outside. To onlookers, the sanctum would appear empty, desolate.

More important, if Uldyssian had done as he hoped, the attack they had just been conjuring would be no more. He tested that hope, seeking any trace of the surge he had earlier noticed.

But there was nothing.

Uldyssian returned to his body. As he opened his eyes, he silently informed the others of his success. The soldiers of Kehjan had no magical support. They were truly like lambs to the slaughter, save that Uldyssian had no desire for that.

Just this once, he prayed. Just this once, let there be no deaths.

He reached to all the edyrem now, asking of them what they could give. His reasons for this he made apparent, so that they would understand. There were no protests, just some surprise and a little regret. However, this was what Uldyssian wished, and so they would

obey.

Again, he felt guilty that they trusted him so much.

Once more, Uldyssian sought out the Kehjani soldiers. It did not take long at all, for they were nearly within sight of his followers. He had little time to plan; it had to happen now.

It was a matter of wills, his—magnified by the contributions of each of the edyrem—against theirs. The soldiers numbered more than his following, but they were merely men and had not been introduced to the gifts they carried within. Thus, there was no comparison at all between the two forces.

But still, Uldyssian would not know if he could succeed until he actually tried.

Sleep, he commanded the Kehjani.

What seemed a light, pure snow—snow in a land seething with heat—showered the oncoming army. Their perfect marching faltered as many looked up in bewilderment. Uldyssian sensed apprehension on the part of the officers, for they knew that this could be nothing good.

The first man to be touched by the gentle flakes yawned. He stopped marching, then dropped to his knees. By this time, several others in the ranks had joined him. An officer rushed up to a pair and raised his whip...then followed their example.

One by one, then by the dozens—then the hundreds—the army of Kehjan set down their weapons, fell quietly to their knees, and simply went to sleep. They did not lie down but just knelt there in row upon row, their arms dangling, their heads cocked to one side or another. Eyes closed and mouths slack, the soldiers rested peacefully.

Those mounted, including the commanders, had no time to flee from their comrades' fate. Riders merely went limp, slumping over in the saddle. Their horses did as they often were inclined to when sleeping; they lowered their heads and slept standing up.

An entire army still faced the edyrem, but it was one that would not awaken until Uldyssian commanded it.

From among his followers, there was at first silence. It was not that they were disappointed in the lack of any bloodshed but that most were not certain that if by shouting out, they would somehow shatter the spell. Once Uldyssian reassured them that this would not happen, the cries rose from everywhere. The edyrem cheered the incredible sight, an image made all the more arresting by the faint snow cover on helmets and shoulders.

Uldyssian ended the shower of sleep-inducing flakes. He smiled gratefully, thankful that his prayer had come to pass—and then wondered just to *whom* he had been praying. Not Inarius or the Three, certainly.

But that hardly mattered at the moment. What did was the welcome vision that he had made come to pass. There would be no horrific fight between his people and Kehjan. The situation was temporary, but it would last long enough, he hoped.

Long enough to deal with Inarius.

Mendeln cursed at the dragon and at matters in general. He swore with a passion he rarely displayed. It had much to do with once more being treated as if he had no say in what was happening. Each time someone desired to use him, he was snatched away from his brother's side and dropped wherever they pleased. That the same thing had happened to others did in no way assuage him. At the moment, Mendeln felt particularly picked on.

His fury was such that he did not even at first pay any mind to Trag'Oul's distress, clearly evident in the creature's voice.

Mendeln...Mendeln...can you feel him? I can barely...maintain a link.

"Return me to my brother! I am sick of this! How many times must I bow to you and Rathma? I am grateful for what I have learned, but this is not—"

Listen to me! demanded the dragon in a tone that cut off any further protest by the human. *Look about you! See where you are!*

Uldyssian's brother did just that—and only then registered that the blackness in which he floated was not the domain of Trag'Oul. This place radiated such emptiness that Mendeln suddenly clutched his arms tight around his body and wished fitfully for the relative cheer of the dragon's home.

Do not fall prey to it! If you do, not only Rathma but you, too, will be lost. Pay heed!

Trag'Oul's warning began to sink in. Trying to focus, Mendeln held the dagger to his face and focused on its reassuring light. Some of the fear began to recede.

"Where—where is this?" he finally managed to ask. "And did you say that Rathma is here somewhere?"

Here...and trapped possibly until the end of all. Sent to this accursed place by Inarius as a reward for seeking to do the right thing.

Mendeln had feared that the Ancient's visit to his father would prove to be a fool's errand, but even he could not imagine the angel so vicious as to condemn his offspring to this hellish abyss. "What is this place?"

Trag'Oul's voice sounded fainter, as if he were farther away now. *What could be called the remotest part of existence! A place so far from all else that to be trapped here is to be cursed forever.*

New chills ran through Mendeln as he heard this. He imagined floating here for all eternity, never to see or hear anything again.

The strain...the strain of reaching out all the way here is...is growing worse. Mendeln ul-Diomed, you must act as the link between myself...and Rathma...if we are to save him.

While Uldyssian's brother more or less understood what the dragon explained to him, a point that Trag'Oul had inadvertently mentioned made him very anxious. The dragon had just revealed that he was not even with Mendeln but rather had sent the human here alone. Trag'Oul kept a *link* with the son of Diomedes but no more.

And if that link—already strained, as the celestial being had informed him—broke, Mendeln's fears of being lost forever would come very true.

Concentrate! Trag'Oul demanded almost angrily. *Do not give in to the fear!*

Mendeln tried his best to focus. Trag'Oul was powerful. He would not let the human be lost. The dragon was very concerned about his pupils. Was he not doing his best also to rescue Rathma?

"Let this be done," the human said to the darkness. Then, in more of a mutter, "If it can be..."

It is up to you now...you know Rathma...you must seek his presence out...you must call him to you. I cannot do more than I have...there is so much else going on.

Despite his curiosity, Mendeln dared not ask to what other tasks the dragon referred. Instead, he turned his mind completely to seeking the Ancient, using the bond that Rathma and he had forged through their roles as mentor and student. He called out to Rathma and sought with the dagger to locate the lost soul.

It was difficult to measure time in this place. Mendeln felt as if he spent an entire lifetime seeking Rathma, seeking and finding nothing.

And then...

Mendeln.

It was faint...so very faint. Mendeln searched in every possible direction but again found nothing. He held the dagger everywhere, silently calling over and over again.

Mendeln.

There! He focused the dagger in the direction from which he believed the call had come. It *sounded* like Rathma, but he still was not certain.

His name came once more, now a bit stronger. *Mendeln! Where—*
"I have him!" he all but roared to Trag'Oul.

Use your power to draw him near. Hurry! They suspect the ruse!

Who "they" were, Uldyssian's brother feared to know. He chose to

ignore the comments, instead following the dragon's suggestions about Rathma.

Clutching the dagger with both hands, he threw all he had learned into summoning Rathma to him. The dagger flared bright, its light comforting in the emptiness.

Rathma, he called in his head. *Rathma...*

Then Mendeln felt something drawing near. He could see nothing but was certain that it was attracted by his spellwork. A faint presence that reminded him of the Ancient grew noticeable.

Something formed in the emptiness. A sphere. It was opaque, almost as if covered by frost. This surely had to be Rathma's magical prison.

But then Mendeln sensed something else. There was still that about the oncoming sphere that hinted of Rathma...but also something else.

Something sinister...and familiar.

Mendeln pointed the dagger directly at the sphere and altered his spellwork.

The frostlike coating burned away, and the maddened face of *Lilith* glared out at him.

"Mendeln!" Her expression immediately shifted, turning from bestial to beguiling. The rest of her transformed as well, turning more human. She resembled Lylia again, but also Serenthia and other women Mendeln had known and admired over the years. "Dear, sweet Mendeln...my savior..."

His heart pounded. Mendeln knew that it was as much because of her sorcery as her unearthly beauty, but he found it difficult to reject her presence. She was helpless now, entirely dependent upon his might. For him, Lilith would do anything, *be* anything. Whoever he desired. She was willing, Uldyssian's brother could see that in her wondrous eyes. They beckoned and promised. They called to him.

Lilith stretched forth her hand. Mendeln started to reach to her.

The dagger flared as if of its own doing. In its even more brilliant light, Mendeln saw her again as she truly was.

Disgust at his own weakness overtook him. "No...no more from you, harpy!"

He uttered words of power, and the sphere shot backward into the darkness. The demoness's shriek was terrible to hear, filled with both fury and despair. Lilith cursed his name even as she called for him.

And then Mendeln could hear the temptress no more.

The shock of confronting her—especially since she was *supposed* to be dead—shook Mendeln so much that he nearly demanded that Trag'Oul immediately return him to his world. However, just as he became determined to do this, he felt Rathma's faint presence again.

Mendeln hesitated but could not risk abandoning this one last hope. He repeated his earlier magic, using the dagger to draw whatever it was he had sensed.

A breath later, another sphere drifted close. Like the first, it was covered with the peculiar, frostlike coating. Keeping wary, Mendeln removed the latter as he had previously.

Before him floated a weary but grateful Rathma.

“I have him!” he shouted to Trag’Oul.

Yes...I know.

And suddenly, Mendeln felt himself propelled through the emptiness. As stunned as he was by the effect, he had the presence of mind to keep focused on Rathma.

Vertigo struck the younger son of Diomedes—and then he landed on something hard.

Above him, the glittering stars that were the dragon proved a welcome sight.

And a voice from his right proved even more welcome. Gasping for breath himself, Inarius’s son said, “You have no idea, Mendeln...my gratitude...for that risk.”

“It was Trag’Oul who was able to send me there,” Uldyssian’s brother pointed out as he turned to face the Ancient. “He who managed to find where you had been cast in the first place.”

Rathma nodded. “And to him, too, I am grateful, but do not underestimate your part. The risk you took was monumental. You could have easily been lost there...” He shook his head. “To be alone in the void—forever—I could imagine no worse fate, not even death.”

As Rathma talked, Mendeln watched him carefully, seeking any sign that he knew what had happened just before his rescue. Yet Lilith’s offspring gave no sign that he had noticed the nearby presence of his murderous mother, who Mendeln had to assume had been drawn to his spell because of her physical ties to Rathma.

Lilith alive...but, as Rathma had pointed out, suffering a fate surely worse than death. It was also one she could not possibly escape. After all, it had only been because of Mendeln and the dragon that Rathma had had any chance.

He suddenly wondered why Trag’Oul had been silent all this time. Surely, their success was worthy of some celebration.

Even as Mendeln thought that, Rathma stood. The Ancient stared up at the constellation, his expression not at all pleasant.

“What is it, Trag?” Rathma demanded. “What’s happening?”

There was a long, worrisome pause before the celestial answered. When he did, it was in a tone of weakness and defeat that shook Mendeln as even the dark emptiness had not.

The strain...was too...much...I could not maintain the...the ploy at the same time...we may have saved you...only to condemn you...with the rest of us...Rathma...

“What do you mean?” he asked, sounding every bit as concerned as Mendeln felt. “What ploy? What happened?”

Sanctuary is no...no longer shielded from their...sight! The Heavenly Host knows they were misled. Trag’Oul’s grief at his failure was so very evident. *The winged warriors are closing in on our world.*

Seventeen

IT IS GOOD.

Tyrael had surveyed the situation sweeping over this false world one last time and found it to his immense satisfaction. The creatures were all at one another's throats, and those who might cause the host some minor difficulty were in complete disarray. There was only one being in all this place that truly concerned him now, and that was the fallen one, Inarius.

The list of the renegade angel's crimes was lengthy, but foremost among them was the very creation of these *humans*. Tyrael understood their origins, and the wrongness of such a thing made him shiver. Angels and *demons*. He could not imagine why even Inarius had not seen fit to eradicate them early on.

But that would happen soon enough. Tyrael could sense the others fast approaching, and the only question he had was why it had taken them so long. There was more to this place—this *Sanctuary*, as he now knew it to be called by the renegade—than appearances suggested. There was some force, some vast reservoir of power, that Inarius had come upon that might be the reason. Tyrael was still investigating that. Likely it was what had caused the delay of the host. In the long run, it would not matter.

He returned to the subject of the angel/demon spawn. Abominations they not only were, but their unsettling potential—which he recognized as easily as the demons he smelled surely had—ultimately demanded their extinction. They offered the possibility of throwing the eternal war utterly on its head, which even he could not fully fathom. True, after he had first seen them, Tyrael had briefly contemplated suggesting their use as soldiers for the High Heavens, but immediately after, the thought of any demon-tainted strain beside him in battle made him completely reject such a notion. No, the humans—and all else here—had to be cleansed from existence.

The angel drifted among the clouds that overlooked both the city and Inarius's sanctum. He had focused much of his energy on shielding himself from the renegade's sight and magic so that he could more readily observe events as they played out. There was little else the angel felt he needed to do; now he was content to watch and wait. Soon the others would arrive, and they would see that he had acted accordingly, opening the way for the cleansing.

Soon, Inarius's blasphemous creation would be no more.

Malic bowed as low as the marble floor allowed. He had no choice. The face of the woman Amolia was covered in black lesions. Before he had come to this place, the specter had looked over the rest of his body and discovered the same held true for his limbs, his torso...every part. The body was nearly spent. He had little time remaining.

Finding a new host had proven harder than he could have imagined. Malic needed one that not only would hold him until he seized Uldyssian's but also had magical ability of its own.

The trouble was, the mage clans had proven quite adept after the slaughter of their council in alerting all their ilk to just who the assassin had been. At the time, Malic had assumed that he would already have Uldyssian's body, and so he had lost valuable opportunities. Then the mage clans' enforcers had begun hunting for him in groups that prevented him from picking off one of their number.

Thus it was that Malic had been grateful when Inarius had given him what seemed a gift—Uldyssian's accursed brother, Mendeln. As it had been Mendeln who had, through some arcane force, brought him back to existence, Malic had found the use of his body a priceless jest.

That incident had turned into the final debacle, though, and led him to this sorry state. He had been forced to make a new deal...and now grovel before one he hated almost as much as Uldyssian.

Inarius stood before him not as the angel but as the youthful Prophet. Malic no longer sneered at the image; he was now desperate for the first time in his life...and afterlife. This had to go as planned.

The angel was clad in gleaming silver armor that hinted of his true status. In fact, a stylized winged warrior was the centerpiece of his breastplate. Over his golden hair, he wore a rimmed helmet with an arched metal crest that ran all the way back to the base. At the Prophet's side hung a scabbard containing a sword with a jeweled hilt.

Under other circumstances, Malic might have laughed mockingly at what he thought was such a gaudy vision. After all, the figure before him was so much more powerful than what his mortal flock saw. These trappings were nothing but stage dress so that Inarius could look that much more impressive when he destroyed the fanatical edyrem.

"I have given you more than one opportunity, Malic," Inarius said. "Opportunities that you have squandered!"

"Circumstance was against me," the high priest dared reply. "And, in one case, betrayal! The water demon was to have secured Uldyssian

for me but chose to give in to his hunger instead.”

“A matter that you would best take up with the Lord Diablo...if you can find him.” Inarius allowed his human aspect to sneer at the absent demon. “He ended this farce of a pact quicker than I expected—which perhaps shows he has some wisdom, as I was about to turn it all against him, anyway.”

“He tried to take the Ascenian for his own purposes,” offered Malic. “Tried and failed.”

“Not unlike yourself.” The angel gazed down at the bent form. “Still, there is, perhaps, some use left in you....”

Malic glanced up. “Whatever I must do, I will!”

“That you shall—and, if possible, for that I will yet grant you the heretic’s body.”

A heavy cough escaped the high priest. Malic was unable to prevent himself from suddenly throwing up on the pristine floor.

Inarius frowned. Under his baleful gaze, the disgusting spill vanished.

“F-forgive me,” the specter managed.

“If you do as I command, I shall.” The Prophet gestured, and Malic rose to his feet like a puppet. “But that shell will no longer suffice. You need a better one.”

The entrance to Inarius’s chamber opened. Out of the corner of his eye, Malic saw an older but quite athletic woman in the robes of a senior priest standing somewhat startled at the doors. Her hand was still formed into the fist she had intended to use to knock politely.

Immediately, the woman bowed her head. “Great one, you summoned me.”

“That I did, Oris. Approach us.”

For the first time, the woman saw Malic. Her brow furrowed as she strode toward the pair. Behind Oris, the doors sealed tight.

With a fatherly smile, the Prophet said, “My loyal Oris, you know there is no one closer to me than you.”

The priestess’s cheeks reddened. Malic realized that she loved her master not only as a believer but as a woman loved a man. “I live to serve you....”

“So you do.” Inarius held out his hands to her. Oris approached him. The angel gently took hold of her by the shoulders and leaned forward.

The kiss was short and little more than a grazing of the lips. To Malic, it was clear that the kiss meant nothing to Inarius. The woman, however, stood stunned and redder than ever.

“My dear, lovely Oris,” the Prophet began anew. “Your devotion to me has been commendable.”

“Proph—Prophet! I—” She looked entirely confused by his action.

“Please, Oris. I have need of you. I wish you to help this unfortunate wretch.”

For the first time, she studied Malic closely. “What terrible disease is this that plagues her?”

“One you need not concern yourself about. What she needs most right now is your comforting hand.”

“Certainly!” The priestess turned to Malic. “Come, my young one, let me help you.”

The specter smiled. “Thank you.”

Oris had no chance to scream. If the bodies were burning out faster than Malic desired, at least his possession of a new one was taking less and less time also.

He watched as the mage’s limp body collapsed in a heap at his feet. Malic had to admit that Oris was a healthy and strong specimen. She would last longer than his previous host.

“There will be no more need of this,” the Prophet murmured, gesturing toward Amolia’s corpse.

Malic watched as the spellcaster’s body turned to dust and blew away into nothing. He was grateful not to be in it any longer. At most, he had likely had a day left.

The angel nodded in satisfaction. “That shall suffice for the time necessary. All that remains now is for you to be clad appropriately.” He casually flicked his hand toward Malic, adding, “Thus!”

The body of the female priest now also wore a breastplate and helmet. A mace with four jagged hooks on the crown hung on the left hip.

Eyeing the changes, Malic looked confused. “What’s this for?”

Inarius eyed him as if the ghost were a fool. Malic immediately put on a humble expression.

This appeared to satisfy the angel. “It should be very obvious to you, high priest,” the Prophet replied. “What else can it be for?” He smiled just as he had before betraying his loyal servant. “We are going off to war.”

“We’re not entering Kehjan,” Uldyssian informed the others. His eyes and power continued to search for Mendeln, but to no avail. “We leave the city alone.”

“After all this?” blurted Serenthia. She pointed in the direction of the slumbering army. “We could walk in and take the capital without anyone stopping us!”

“That was never the reason. The reason always had to do with

Inarius. Well, he's thrown down the gauntlet. He's inviting us to come to him, can't you feel that?"

They could not. Even now, as powerful as the edyrem in general had become, they could not feel the angel's touch. Uldyssian did not like that.

"What do we do, Master Uldyssian?" asked Jonas, the gaunt Parthan ever ready to obey.

"We're not far from the grasslands between the city and the Cathedral of Light. We turn in that direction."

Serenthia frowned. "And then what?"

"Then we fight for our lives...again."

Despite the abrupt change in their intended route, Uldyssian's followers argued little when told. Yet again, they trusted in their leader and what he planned. Uldyssian hid from everyone the fact that he had no true idea what to do save face the angel himself. In his mind, the rest of Inarius's followers were nothing. Inarius was the one who had to be defeated.

And even that might not be enough to save Sanctuary.

The edyrem wasted no time in moving on, their easy victory over the Kehjani army spurring their spirits. The grasslands, an open area in the midst of the all-consuming jungles, were believed to have been the reason the Cathedral had originally chosen a northerly location for its base of operations. It allowed for an easy path for pilgrims going to and from the shining edifice and the capital.

It now made for the perfect place for war.

As the edyrem marched, Uldyssian kept watch for any covert strikes by either Inarius or one of his minions. However, nothing happened. At first, he did not understand why the angel would let all of them travel unmolested, but as the journey progressed and still nothing happened, it slowly dawned on him just why that might be.

But it was not until Mendeln returned—with Rathma beside him—that Uldyssian was able to confirm his suspicion with Inarius's offspring. Guiding them and Serenthia slightly away from the others, he asked Rathma his opinion.

"Yes, that is exactly it," the cowed Ancient agreed. "You have come to know my father well. He is indeed preparing a spectacle that will show all those in Sanctuary that his is the ultimate power. He intends your defeat to be a glorious one!" Rathma shook his head, a rueful smile on his lips. "And that even if the world itself should exist no more than a few minutes past his victory. Such madness!"

"He might not even have the few minutes," Uldyssian pointed out. "The angels could arrive before that."

Rathma grew grimmer yet. "You have no idea how true you speak.

They were distracted by Trag's ploy, but that is no more. They now know exactly where Sanctuary is. Time flows differently for them, but I would say that we have maybe a day or two before they fall upon us."

The others—even Mendeln, it appeared—looked aghast. Uldyssian could not help but gape. "As little as that? I thought maybe a week—"

"A week would be a blessing."

"Damn Inarius for not listening! There might've been some hope against the angels if he had."

Rathma said nothing. Uldyssian looked around at the others. His expression grew stubborn. "We don't tell anyone else! If we're all to die, better we die fighting! If somehow we defeat Inarius, then we can worry about anything else. No one else must know. Agreed?"

He received no dissension. They rejoined the edyrem and moved on.

Uldyssian had hoped to make it to the Cathedral that day, but his estimation of their pace proved too ambitious. They barely reached the edge of the grasslands just after dark. He knew that to go on was to play into Inarius's intentions yet could not help feeling that to stop would do the same.

"He will not attack this night," Rathma finally informed him. "My father wants the slaughter of the edyrem—and, especially, your downfall—completely visible to his followers. No, he will wait for daylight, foolish as that might seem to us."

"If only we could reach the Cathedral during the night and still have the strength to fight him..."

The Ancient glanced out at the night-enshrouded grasslands. "I cannot say exactly why, but I feel that if you would attempt that, you would regret it. There is something out there, something best left for the light of the sun."

Frowning, Uldyssian stared at the landscape ahead. Now that Rathma had mentioned it, he, too, noticed something unsettling about the visually tranquil grasses. The view was innocent enough; the tall brown and green grasses swayed gently in the breeze. A few creatures called out, most of them insects or the occasional night bird. There was nothing that in any manner hinted of threat.

Yet he felt that Rathma was right.

The edyrem made camp just within the jungle. Aware of how inviting the grasslands looked, Uldyssian was adamant in his decision that no one, not even the sentries, step a foot beyond the last of the trees.

But it turned out that there was one who did not obey. Once most of the edyrem were asleep, Uldyssian waited for Achilios to join them,

yet as the minutes passed and the hunter did not appear, the son of Diomedes believed he knew just what had happened.

“He’s out there, isn’t he?” Uldyssian asked Rathma.

“You know him better than I.”

“Can’t you sense him?”

“No.” The Ancient looked to Mendeln. “Can you?”

Uldyssian’s brother held up his dagger, then pointed it toward the grasslands. The faint glow did not change. “I think...there is a hint... but I cannot be certain.” As he lowered the blade, he added, “But it would be like him, wouldn’t it, Uldyssian?”

Serenthia grew upset. “We’ve got to go after him! If there is something out there, it might—”

She refrained from using the word kill, as Achilios was already dead, but they shared her concern. Uldyssian put a foot into what he considered the true boundary between the jungle and the grasslands, then concentrated as hard as he could.

“He’s out there. I can’t place where, but he’s definitely out there.” A part of Uldyssian wanted to go chasing after his friend. “He’s scouting for us.”

Even Rathma showed some surprise at this. “Was that wise of him?”

“This is Achilios,” Uldyssian returned. “He makes his own choices... and he’s very capable.”

Inarius’s son nodded, then prudently left with Mendeln while Uldyssian dealt with Serenthia.

“This is ridiculous!” she blurted. “Uldyssian, he can’t be allowed to risk himself like this! I know why he is. Because he thinks that since he’s dead and I’m not, what we have can’t go on.”

“There’s a good chance that we’ll all be dead soon, Serry. I think Achilios is just doing what he can maybe to save the woman he loves. You can’t fault him for that.”

She suddenly beat her hands against his chest. “I fault him for leaving me over and over! I fault him for thinking that I don’t love him enough—”

Her fists flared with unbridled energy. If not for his own inherent defenses, Uldyssian knew that he would have been badly injured. As it was, both of them were suddenly surrounded by a green fire that originated from him.

“Serry! Stop this now!”

The merchant’s daughter shook uncontrollably, then started sobbing. The fire vanished from around her hands. As it did, Uldyssian retracted his own spell.

Or, at least, he tried to. The green flames resisted. The heat around

both of them continued to increase. Sweat began pouring down Uldyssian's face, and he heard Serenthia gasping for breath.

Gritting his teeth, the son of Diomedes focused harder. He demanded that his power obey.

And it did. Just like that, the flames ceased. Yet the effort took more out of Uldyssian than he had expected.

Serenthia shifted in his arms, bringing his attention back to her. She looked up, her face drawn from her outburst.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Uldyssian.... I didn't mean to lose control of myself...but..."

"It's all right. I understand."

She wiped the moisture from around her eyes. "It's just that...I suddenly feared that I might not see him again this time."

Her fear was a reasonable one, but Uldyssian could not tell her that. "You'll see him again. I know Achilios. Nothing can keep him from you. You should know that by now."

"I hope...I hope he'll be all right out there," the dark-haired woman murmured as she stepped away from him. "I hope he will be."

Eyeing the grasslands, Serenthia quietly walked away. Uldyssian kept watch until he was certain that she was simply going to sleep, then turned his own attention back to the grasslands. Try as he might, he could not determine exactly where Achilios was.

"You'd better come back to her," Uldyssian whispered. "You'd better come back to her...."

If only so that they could die *together* this time...

Serenthia looked as if she slept, but she did not. Regardless of what Uldyssian had said, she could not merely leave things be. Achilios had been reckless, true, but Serenthia would not abandon him because of that trait. After all, he had always been reckless, but also extremely loyal.

And so, while her body lay still, her mind went in search of the man she loved.

Serenthia soared over the grasslands, seeking any hint of Achilios's presence. She was aware that, being dead, he did not leave a trace as Uldyssian or she might, but the merchant's daughter was certain that her bond with the archer more than made up for that. She *would* find him.

The grasslands had a surreal calmness that should have set her mind at ease, but instead, Serenthia soon felt as if something watched her from behind. Yet when she reversed her view, it was to find nothing.

Finally shaking it off as nerves, Serenthia pushed herself faster and faster. Achilios could not be far.

Something to the east caught her attention. She veered toward there with ease. There was nothing visible, but then, the hunter would hardly be standing out in the open.

As she neared the area in question, Serenthia was finally able to tell that what she had thought might be Achilios was instead something else. Secure in the knowledge that she could neither be seen nor heard, Serenthia hovered over the spot, seeking the source of the strangeness she felt.

When that failed, she descended. Lower and lower she brought her view, until at last Serenthia stared into the very ground.

And then she saw the hole.

It was not truly physical but bordered between that and some plane of existence almost akin to that which she currently inhabited. The gap was wide enough to fit a man or something slightly larger, but the edges seemed in flux, as if prepared to close...or open farther.

Curious, Serenthia descended lower yet, directly through the center of the gap.

The moment she passed into it, her entire perspective shifted. Serenthia knew that she was no longer in Sanctuary, but where she was, it was impossible to say.

Something black and seemingly consisting entirely of huge, sharp teeth shot up at her.

Serenthia tried to retreat through the gap, only to discover that it was far, far above her mental form. How she had descended so deep, she did not know, but all that mattered now was to escape.

The thing closed on her, its many teeth gnashing. Up close, she saw that it had a circular mouth and two tiny, almost-blind eyes. Somehow, though, the fiendish beast clearly knew where Serenthia was despite her not being there physically.

Undulating like a snake, the creature pursued at a pace far greater than hers. Serenthia feared that it would catch up before she reached the gap, and if it did, there was no doubt in her mind that despite her lack of body, it would destroy her. It was possible that her powers would work against it, but for some reason, Serenthia suspected that it was better to run rather than fight.

But she was not going to make it. The gap was still too far away. Just below, the horrific mouth opened wide, filling her view. Serenthia smelled decay, and the fact that she could smell anything at all added to her fear that she was not safe from harm.

She wished she had her spear. With the weapon, she would have at least had the ghost of a chance. Serenthia's desire was so intense that

she could almost feel the spear in her hand—

And suddenly, she realized that she held it.

It was not actually the spear, Serenthia saw, but rather a magical representation her mind had created. Nevertheless, it gave her hope. Readying it, she aimed for the center of the creature's cavernous maw, not hard to do, considering how wide the mouth was now.

It all but had her. The teeth gnashed eagerly. Serenthia threw, knowing that her entire will had to go into this last desperate attempt.

The gleaming spear vanished deep into the beast. Serenthia then imagined the weapon burning with fire hot enough to melt rock and, therefore, the insides of this nightmarish thing.

The wormlike beast let out a gargling sound. Its body glowed like hot coals.

It exploded.

Bits of the monster flew through Serenthia, who instinctively sought to protect herself. Ichor rained down, then dissipated.

Although she had destroyed her attacker, Serenthia's first thought was to flee. Yet she had barely started to withdraw, when it occurred to her that there had to be more going on here than a simple den for a monstrous beast. Studying her surroundings better, the raven-tressed woman reaffirmed her belief that she was no longer in Sanctuary. However much that disturbed her, it also came to her mind that *Achilios* also might have discovered this "passage" and investigated it. That might be why Serenthia had not been able to trace him thus far. If she left without making sure that he was not here...

Decision made, she flew down the passage. As she did, she could not help but glance more and more at what passed for its walls. Inspecting closely, Serenthia discovered that they were not even completely solid but actually like black pitch that constantly dripped.

Then, up ahead, there came a disconcerting light, a light as crimson as blood. Serenthia slowed, suddenly uncertain about going any farther.

Once again, it was Serenthia's deep love for *Achilios* that drove her on toward the monstrous light. Had she had any true flesh, it would have crawled from fear and disgust. Whatever lay ahead radiated an evil so strong that even *Lilith* paled by comparison.

It was all Serenthia could do to push herself to the end of the passage. Once there, she peered into the light, trying to focus on what lay within it.

And what she saw made the slaughter of the *Kehjani* merchants and mages insignificant by comparison. Her courage finally broke. Serenthia wanted nothing more than to return to the relative safety of her own body. With all the will she could muster, she strained to

escape the magical passage and what lay at the other end.

There was a tingling sensation when Serenthia finally passed through the gap. But even when the grasslands once again filled her view, she did not slow. Serenthia did not look back once, fearing that in doing so, she would find creatures more monstrous than the worm giving chase.

She returned at last to her body.

Serenthia jolted up, her eyes already wide. She quickly spun around, certain that fiends loomed all about her. When she found nothing, the frantic woman immediately raced back to where she had left Uldyssian.

He was still there, still standing and watching the grasslands. At any other time, Serenthia would have been touched by his determination, for it was obvious that he continued to hope to find some trace of Achilios out there. However, what she had seen outweighed even her concern for the man she loved.

It was all Serenthia could do to keep from shouting as she neared Uldyssian. He turned as she arrived, his expression telling her that he sensed her tremendous anxiety.

"Serry!" The son of Diomedes took hold of her arm. "What is it? A bad dream about Achilios?"

Naturally, that would be his first thought when she came running so. Serenthia shook her head.

"No!" she gasped. Then, thinking better, Serenthia lowered her voice to a whisper. "No. Uldyssian...no dream. I—I went out there to look...to look for Achilios—"

"What?" It was clear to her that he was doing all that he could to keep from raising his own voice. Uldyssian understood exactly what Serenthia had done in order to search for the archer, and his fury was understandable. "You should've told me first! No! You shouldn't have tried anything at all! What would have happened if—"

"Uldyssian, hush! Listen to me! You need to hear what I found!"

"Why? Was Achilios...was he—"

"No...though I pray that he didn't run across it and fall victim to the guardian!" Serenthia gazed down, lost in that horrible thought. What if Achilios *had* discovered the magical gap and had entered? What if she had not noticed any trace of him, but he *had* been there, a prisoner, all the time?

"Serry! Serry!" Uldyssian forced her to focus on him again. "Come back! Now, tell me. Tell me what's shaken you."

"It's..." Taking a deep breath, she tried once more. "It's... horrifying!"

With that, the story came spilling out of her. The sensation that

something was amiss, the discovery of the magical gap, her decision to investigate it, and what happened when she did.

Uldyssian was stunned...and even more furious than ever. "You should've turned right back!"

"Listen! There's more. So much more. Listen!" Serenthia described the beast guarding the way and how she had managed to destroy it. Uldyssian's brow rose at this, but he refrained from interrupting. "And then...and then I reached the end of the passage and saw them...*all* of them! An endless sea of them. So horrific. So terrifying!"

She became caught up in the nightmarish vision again. The grotesque, fiendish faces. The macabre, chilling forms. The incredible aura of evil...

"Serry!" Uldyssian shook her by the shoulders. "*What* did you see?"

The merchant's daughter steeled herself. In a low, steady voice, she managed. "I saw...I saw into what could only be what Rathma called the *Burning Hells*, Uldyssian! The passage in the grasslands leads out of our world and into wherever *they* must exist!"

He opened his mouth in what surely would have been a denial of her words, then shut it tight. Uldyssian nodded grimly. They had all dealt with demons long enough. A magical gateway to the infernal realms was no longer a stretch of the imagination.

Seeing that Uldyssian would not argue, Serenthia forced herself to tell him the worst yet. "They were there. They were there. Thousands and thousands of them! Maybe more. I don't know—their numbers looked endless."

"Who, Serry? Who?"

Her eyes grew wide as saucers as she continued to envision their ranks. "An army...an army of *demons*. And they can only be getting ready to march on Sanctuary!"

Eighteen

Not for a moment had Achilios hesitated to go out and scout for his friends. His existence—if he could even call this miserable suffering through which he went that—was expendable. It was important for the others to survive...for Serenthia to survive.

With Uldyssian so distracted, it had been simple for the hunter to slip away from where he had been lurking. The tall grass hid him well, and the soft ground eliminated whatever unlikely sound his boots *might* make.

As ever, he kept an arrow ready. The quiver was filled with more. That was the only useful gift that the angel Tyrael had given him, a never-ending supply of sharp and, in some manner, magical arrows. Achilios wished that he could show his gratitude to the treacherous angel—to *both* angels who had used him—by managing to fire a few into whatever served as their hearts.

But, for now, he cared only that the bolts would prove of use against whatever might lurk out here.

And there was certainly *something* hidden in the grasslands. Inarius would have planned some trick by which to wear Uldyssian down before any true confrontation. At least, that was the impression Achilios had of the Prophet.

He was long gone from the encampment by this point, but thus far the only thing he had discovered was the disconcerting lack of any wildlife whatsoever. It was not just that Achilios had run across no rabbits, cats, or other large animals, but there were also no birds or, judging by the complete silence, even one insect. The creatures of the grasslands had found it prudent to flee, and that did not bode well.

There was also hardly anything that could even be called a breeze anymore. What had existed when Achilios had first set out had lessened more and more as he progressed, to the point where only his trained eyes could see the barely perceptible movement of the grass.

Achilios hesitated. For the first time, he noticed that some of the grass ahead was weaving contrary to others. No wind could cause that.

He raised the bow, suspicious that the odd movement meant that something moved low through the grass. Out here, it might be an animal as powerful as one of the jungle cats, but Achilios doubted it. Most animals *fled* his presence, acutely aware of the wrongness

inherent in him.

But if it was not an animal, he could think of only one thing, a demon of some sort.

Standing as still as a rock, Achilios waited. The grass continued to weave in its odd fashion, but nothing emerged.

Finally growing impatient, the hunter took a step forward. Instantly, he noted some more agitated movement from the nearest plants. Again, Achilios paused, bow ready to fire.

And again, he was disappointed. Achilios had heard as a child an expression *the patience of the dead*, but he found it held no truth when it came to him. There were limits to even the hunter's will, and he had reached those limits long ago. Indeed, if anything, being dead had made him *more* impatient than he had been in life.

Still keeping the bow steady, Achilios finally trod forward. To his surprise, the spot where he expected something to be hiding revealed *nothing*. No animal. No demon. It was almost as if the grass moved of its own accord.

Frowning, the blond archer scratched a dirt-flaked cheek. His instincts—and possibly what passed for his edyrem abilities—were as strong as if he were still breathing, and they insisted that something was amiss. Yet whatever it was he could not discover.

That it was night bothered him less than it did Mendeln or Uldyssian. Even as a youth, Achilios had always had exceptional night vision. Undead, it had heightened. He surveyed the area meticulously, seeking some hint of the threat he felt certain surrounded him.

A small, dark form buried in the grass to his left caught his attention. Setting the bow next to him—but keeping his fingers close to it—Achilios used his free hand to tug at the object. The grass was thickly wound around it, so tangled, in fact, that he nearly tore apart what he was trying to retrieve.

Frustrated, Achilios pulled his hand from the bow and grabbed his knife. The grass proved stubborn to cut, but he finally did.

The mangled thing had once been a black bird. The body had nearly been crushed to a pulp, and some of the grass had wound so tightly around the body that the head and wings had nearly been severed.

Achilios judged its death to have been no more than a day. Had there been the usual flies about, the body would have been in worse shape. As it was, it unnerved him that nothing had thus far come to feed on the carrion. He turned the avian over, trying to decide just what had killed it. Other than the tightly wound grass blades, there was no evidence of anything that would have left injury.

He stiffened. Keeping his eyes fixed on the dead bird, he slowly

lowered the corpse to the ground. At the same time, Achilios maneuvered the hand with the knife toward the now-open palm. He slipped the blade into his other hand, then started to reach for the bow.

His fingers never reached it. His wrist was snagged, what suddenly bound it tightening enough to cut off the blood of a living man.

Achilios spun around, bringing the knife down. The sharp edge cut deep into *grass*.

His other hand came free, the grass blades wrapped around the wrist falling off and wriggling on the ground. The hunter grabbed for the bow—

The grass lunged at him from all sides. It snagged his arms like a hundred coiling serpents. Achilios managed to slash a few more blades, but then his bound hand could not reach the rest.

Suddenly, the grass underneath began churning around and around. The ground there grew soft, and to his horror, Achilios started to sink.

Not again! Not again! He remembered with dread the tentacles of the demon in the forest and how at one point he had been certain that the creature would drag him under. Instead, it had sought to tear him apart, but that fate—more welcome to him than the other, obvious choice—was not what was intended here.

And as he struggled to keep himself above the surface, the hunter knew that this was no lone occurrence. He had discovered part of the Prophet's strategy. The angel intended to strip all hope from Uldyssian by the time the two of them actually confronted each other. There were probably other such terrifying spots hidden all through the grasslands, perhaps even with different menaces.

Achilios's leg sank beneath the soft, turned-up soil. He fought to free himself not only for his own sake but for that of his friends.

For Serenthia...

But although the archer fought with a strength beyond mortal extremes, he could not stop his other leg from following the first, then the rest of his lower half. That left him all but facing into the dirt.

The empty hand went next. Achilios shifted his knife around, trying to cut his remaining wrist free. The sharp edge sliced through several grass blades, and at last Achilios could maneuver his hand better. He quickly slashed at what remained around his wrist.

The hand came free. With monumental effort, the hunter ripped his forearm loose. Unfortunately, his other arm was completely under, and now fronds were seeking his throat. The dirt—the hungry dirt—was only inches from his face.

A desperate growl escaped Achilios. He turned the knife around and dug furiously at the base of the grass nearest his head. Achilios madly

chopped at the ground, ripping away at whatever plants he could reach. He felt the pressure on his arm ease up. Like a wet dog, he shook the soil from his other shoulder.

With a grin only death could allow, Achilios raised himself slightly. That gave him even more room to adjust his reach. He immediately put the knife to work. More and more of his buried arm came free.

But then, from beneath the ground, from what surely were the few roots he had left after severing the grass blades, new shoots darted up. They grew to full maturity in less time than it took him to grasp the enormity of their rising.

And with an eager vigor, the new blades coiled around him in such numbers that it seemed Achilios wore a shirt of grass. They tightened their grip on his hand, and although he refused to release the knife, their work made it certain that it was as useless to him as all else.

Both arms were pulled under. The hunter's torso became buried up to his chest. Achilios shook his head frantically as he sought to keep it from coming closer to the ground.

Then, from beneath his face, a new patch of sinister blades blossomed to life. Achilios knew that he could do nothing to stop them and in his fury screamed his anger.

Grass thrust up into his mouth and nose. Other blades snared his head, hugging him like a lover as they forced his open mouth to kiss the dirt. Darkness closed over Achilios's face as he was dragged under....

Seconds later, the only sign remaining of his presence was the abandoned bow. The grass that now filled the entire spot gently weaved back and forth.

Waiting...

* * *

Achilios had *not* returned, and there were demons in wait. Inarius surely had his own followers ready to attack and even if they did not, there was an army of angels coming to destroy everything.

Despite that dread reality, Uldyssian had no choice but to march the edyrem into the grasslands. He was now playing a game whose rules had been decided by some force beyond his ken. His only hope lay in doing the unexpected...but whatever that might be, he could not say.

The sun had risen, but what might have been something to lift his spirits quickly proved extremely troubling. Not only had the fiery orb seemed to rise sooner and faster than normally, but it also rose in the *wrong* direction. It now hung in the north, the same direction the

edyrem had to march to meet their foe.

Somehow, Inarius had *moved* the sun.

Although no one made mention of it out loud, the astounding feat left the edyrem slow and disheartened as they journeyed. The question in everyone's head was obvious to Uldyssian: How could someone who could move the sun be defeated?

It was Rathma who offered him some ray of hope, however slight. He was the only one among them who looked upon the sight unimpressed.

"That is not the sun," he informed Uldyssian. "What you see is illusion. The sun is still where it was, but our perceptions see it in the north."

"Which means?"

Rathma almost sneered at the sun. "What my father did took much power, but in the end, it is only your imagination that makes it real. It does not make his true might any greater than it was before."

It was an unsatisfying answer in many ways, for Uldyssian still did not know the angel's limits. As far as he could see, if this was but an illusion of sorts, it was a *damned* impressive one.

And what was worse, it was constantly blinding.

Still, if it was an illusion, it occurred to him that there was something he could do to negate Inarius's trick, something Uldyssian had already done more than once in the past. True, the very first time, it had also been achieved through Lilith's manipulation of him, but now he was far past needing her foul power to augment his. It was certainly worth a try, at least.

Uldyssian concentrated on the sky, focusing on one of the tiny clouds scattered here and there. All he needed was the one.

A wind arose, the first cool breeze anyone had felt in weeks. Around him, the son of Diomedes sensed the others react. They knew that whatever was happening was his doing and took heart from it.

And with that to further stimulate his hopes, Uldyssian threw himself into the spell. The air shifted. The cloud expanded, becoming ten, a hundred, a thousand times its original size. It also thickened and, as it did, grew a deep gray.

Uldyssian not only called upon his own power, but he continued to press it and his will on his very surroundings. He had done this before, albeit not on such a grand scale. It concerned him to expend himself so much before facing Inarius, but the Prophet had left him no real choice, which he expected was just the way his rival wanted it.

But Uldyssian could not think about such things. He had to concern himself only with the moment at hand.

The cloud now absorbed all those others around it, then expanded

farther. It crept purposely toward the north, eating away at the blue sky.

Then—at last—it reached where the sun stood defiant. Uldyssian's will almost faltered then, for surely he could not so simply defeat the angel's strategy. Yet the first edges of the massive gray cloud soon spread across where the sun shone.

As it did, the light grew less blinding. A hopeful murmur arose among Uldyssian's followers. His own pulse quickened as the sun went from fully dominant to partially seen, then to barely a sliver and, finally, a vaguely hinted-at shape that did just enough to keep the grasslands from being plunged into darkness.

Daring to breathe, Uldyssian glanced around.

The edyrem broke into a cheer.

He looked to Rathma, who bore a rare, if brief, smile. The Ancient bowed his head.

"You have just put uncertainty back into the heart of my father," the cowed figure complimented.

Mendeln grinned at his brother. Only Serenthia did not share the general outpouring of confidence, but the pain on her face lessened slightly.

It also immediately reminded Uldyssian that whatever he had just accomplished, he still faced a legion of terrible foes.

But he could not let the others see his concern. Maintaining a façade of triumph, Uldyssian led his people on. At the very least, they could now concentrate better on the path ahead—and he hoped that would give the edyrem some chance against whatever next struck at them.

The grass grew thicker the further into the region they marched. Uldyssian had warned everyone to keep on guard, and he was pleased with the attentiveness he felt throughout the band. The most promising of his followers had been placed at the front and outer perimeters, and as usual, those least able to defend themselves were in a position within the main body but toward the back. For once, Uldyssian had wanted to leave them behind, but no one could think of anywhere they would be safe. He could not be certain that the mage clans just might free themselves, then take revenge on what edyrem they could find. Never mind that the group would consist mainly of defenseless children and elders.

No, the edyrem were best off together, especially if they were all to perish. At least then there would be a fighting chance.

"There it is," Mendeln suddenly and quietly declared.

Uldyssian would not have had to ask what his brother meant, even if he had not seen it at the same time. The gargantuan edifice gleamed

despite the thick cloud cover, gleamed as if made of diamond. Uldyssian could not make out any details save the sharply pointed spire towering over all else.

As far away as the edyrem still were from it, its appearance meant that there remained little time before Inarius would wait no longer. Uldyssian's followers were nearly midway between the Cathedral and the city, the perfect place for any monstrous tableau the renegade angel wished to create.

"Should we not also be able to see the Golden Path?" Uldyssian's brother added. "I would expect it to be very close by."

The Golden Path was the direct route between Kehjan and the Cathedral of Light, the way by which pilgrims trekked to the holy site and then back to the capital. The name was of spiritual reference and had nothing to do with its appearance, for the Path was merely a shaved-down area first cut by the Prophet's acolytes. It was now completely maintained by the sandaled or bare feet of the legions of daily supplicants, who came in such numbers that they trampled down any plant foolish enough to try to grow along the way.

But although it had surely only been a day or two since the last pilgrims had come this way, there was now, for as far as the eye could see—and farther for Uldyssian—nothing but more tall grass. The Golden Path was no more.

"My father," Rathma stated bluntly, not that everyone had not already guessed that.

Uldyssian raised a hand to signal the edyrem to halt. He would permit no one to proceed until he had thoroughly investigated the area ahead. This could also be a trick by the waiting demons, who he assumed had to be in league with Inarius. After all, they had as much at stake as the angel did in guaranteeing that Uldyssian fail.

Making certain that the sky remained cloaked in gray, Uldyssian looked inward. He let his gift reach ahead and then began the process of methodically searching. A part of him also hoped that he might yet find some sign of Achilios, although that was becoming more and more a dream.

All else faded from Uldyssian's attention as he made certain that the way ahead was safe. He would not let his people fall prey to Inarius's machinations. He would not let that happen—

The screams buffeted him from all sides, edyrem everywhere sending mental cries of fear. As he ripped himself from his search, Uldyssian felt Serenthia violently shaking him.

"Uldyssian! Snap out of—" Her voice was cut off.

He turned—and suddenly was snagged around the legs and one arm by what he at first thought were slim tentacles. They were nothing of

the sort, though. Instead, the very grass sought to bring him down. Worse, he quickly saw that edyrem everywhere were in stages of being strangled or dragged into the dirt. Some were even sinking.

And the worst-struck place was where the children and others who could not truly defend themselves stood. Despite the bravery of their protectors, they were being torn from one another and pulled in every direction. Their screams were horrific to hear.

Uldyssian put a hand to some of the grass binding him. Fire burned away those blades, but almost immediately, twice their number sprouted from the cindered ends. The same disaster was repeated all over, with even Rathma struggling in vain to free himself.

This was no coincidence. Uldyssian had done exactly as Inarius had desired of him. He had purposely set about a situation that would distract the edyrem leader—a situation that demanded Uldyssian's attention—even if for only a moment. The son of Diomedes had obliged him yet again by walking right into the trap. All the angel had needed was that moment.

Grass strained for his throat. Uldyssian tugged as best he could on what was already wrapped around him. With some effort, he summoned the power to slice clean all the nearby grass.

But once again, the field not only regenerated itself faster than he could destroy it but became more fierce. The screams that constantly bombarded Uldyssian's hearing were not merely of fright...they were of agony.

His people were dying. Once more, Uldyssian was failing them.

His mind raged at the Prophet's uncaring nature. To the angel, humans were less than nothing. That their kind still existed was likely only because Inarius could not stand having no one to honor his greatness. That, and the fact that such utter isolation would have been too much even for him.

That Inarius could call himself a warrior of the Light, a champion of Good, was a jest that Uldyssian found too cruel. He envisioned Inarius as the Prophet, the handsome, eternal youth laughing at his helplessness.

As that vision magnified in his head, Uldyssian burned inside with an anger he never experienced before. The son of Diomedes felt as if he were about to explode, yet he had no outlet. He needed something at which to strike, and there was only the grass.

The grass...

The grass...

As had happened before, fire burst into manic life all around him. It was not merely fire as might have been seen in the camp last night, but gargantuan emerald and yellow flames that devoured the nearest

blades so quickly and thoroughly that there was nothing left from which to sprout new grass.

And that fire then shot through the region, racing with calculated madness among the edyrem. It left of the grass only black dust, but not one of Uldyssian's people was so much as singed. For them, the flames felt instead like a brief moment of cool air caressing them.

But it was not enough simply to save the edyrem from the trap into which he had led them. Uldyssian's anger knew no bounds. Suddenly, everything around him he perceived as a threat to his followers and, especially, to himself. Every blade of grass for as far as the eye could see was a monster, a servant of the Prophet. Glaring at them, Uldyssian only wished them gone.

The fire bowed to his will. It shot forth from the vicinity of the edyrem, devouring plant life in all other directions. In its wake, it left a blackened landscape that, thanks to the son of Diomedes, was not in the least bit hot.

And as the edyrem watched in awe, the rest of the grasslands surrendered to Uldyssian's fury. From where he stood, the burnt area spread farther and farther. The flames rushed on unchecked, growing more distant but also more voracious.

Uldyssian watched it all without hardly drawing a breath. He watched it all without any care for the destruction he caused. Why, in fact, should he stop with merely the grasslands? If Inarius enjoyed these little plots, then even the jungles were suspect. Was it not for the best to let the fire go as far as it could, even into the capital, where there was nothing but deceit and evil almost on par with what the angels and demons offered? Why—

Someone slapped him hard across the face. Uldyssian let out a roar and focused a good part of his power on the miscreant.

The raw blast of energy struck Mendeln square before Uldyssian realized just who his target was.

"Nooo!" Horrified, he fought to quell his work. Mendeln fell out of sight, adding to his shock. Despite all that, it was still a struggle for Uldyssian to bring himself under control.

There was not a living blade of grass in sight. In fact, the only living things left were the edyrem...and not all of them. There were bodies here, there, and too many other places.

Many of them were children.

However, Uldyssian had no time for Inarius's innocent victims, so concerned was he about the one belonging to him. He shoved Rathma aside and ran toward where he had last seen his brother. With such force as he had leveled against Mendeln, it was certain that the younger sibling was not only dead but mangled unrecognizably.

But Mendeln's face and form were in perfect condition, although lying at an angle that sent chills through Uldyssian. Letting out a sob, the older brother bent by the black-robed figure's side. He had healed others very close to death. If there was a chance to do it once more, he prayed this would be that moment.

The sky crackled with lightning.

Despite the tragedy of his own situation, Uldyssian could not help but glance up at what should not have been. He had created only thick clouds to shield his followers from Inarius's damnable sun. No storm had been part of that spell.

But now it came nonetheless.

The rain fell with terrible strength, as if a huge bucket had been turned over, a bucket that never finished emptying. The savage torrent mercilessly battered people into the ground. Even Uldyssian found himself hard pressed to stand, but stand he did.

And as the son of Diomedes straightened, he saw the movement from the north. At first, it appeared to flow toward him and his followers much as the terrible rain did. However, as it drew relentlessly nearer, it divided into hundreds and hundreds of robed, helmeted figures on horseback. They wielded curved swords and maces, and their wild shouts were like thunder.

Inquisitor warriors—the militant arm of the Cathedral of Light.

But there was more to them than what at first was obvious. Uldyssian sensed that difference more than he saw it. Wary, he stared at the oncoming legions, reaching out to see them as if he stood just before the pounding hooves.

And then Uldyssian made out just what it was about them that bothered him. It was best revealed in their eyes—their eyes that were now without pupils. Instead, a radiant gold fire blazed forth from beneath the lids, an inhuman force that he saw filled each and every warrior he searched.

It took only a glance at their rabid expressions to see that there was little left of the original minds that had inhabited these bodies. Of all those in the ranks, only the helmeted woman in the lead and a handful of high-ranking priests mixed among the fighters still had eyes that indicated that they were themselves. The rest had all been utterly subjugated by Inarius's will.

At that moment, Rathma stepped up next to him, the Ancient's hood and cloak untouched by the incessant rain. He somehow still looked no more pleasant than a drenched Uldyssian.

His words had nothing to do with the ferocious onslaught racing toward them. "Be not concerned about your brother, for I was able to shield him just as you struck out."

Uldyssian glanced down at his sibling again. Mendeln moaned, and his eyes fluttered open. As Rathma had indicated, he seemed entirely well...no thanks to Uldyssian. The older brother had been too distraught to notice.

But as guilty as Uldyssian felt about Mendeln and as concerned he was about his unthinking outburst, the events now unfolding before them demanded his attention. He stared anew at the charging Inquisitors, hoping that, as with Mendeln, his initial beliefs had been incorrect.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Prophet's warriors, Uldyssian immediately sensed that he was not. The dread spectacle was exactly as he feared it.

"He has fallen even more than I could imagine," Inarius's son shouted, "and may have shown us at last why he is not concerned that a heavenly host is nigh upon Sanctuary!"

"What do you mean?"

"You sense his power within those misguided fools, do you not? Then you can also sense where my father has been able to draw so much from, for this is surely more than he himself could bear alone!"

Uldyssian eyed the oncoming horde closer. He looked within one random warrior and finally recognized what he should have known all along. Rathma was right. The angel was not this strong by himself.

Inarius was drawing all the power he could from the Worldstone, power against which the efforts of Uldyssian and all the edyrem combined could very well prove futile.

Nineteen

Uldyssian shook his head, wanting the truth to be nothing more than a bad dream. Yet the Inquisitors continued to ride toward the edyrem, and the power of the angel filled them to overflowing. These would not be simple fighters easy to defeat, as would have been the case with the Kehjani. Uldyssian was not sure how powerful the individual Inquisitors would be, but he and his people were certain to face a terrible foe.

He reached out to the others, preparing them for the imminent battle. Even when warned that these would not be mere mortal men that they faced, his edyrem remained stalwart. Their courage both stirred and concerned Uldyssian, who knew that many would die.

And still Inarius did not deign to enter the conflict.

“Where is he?” the son of Diomedes demanded of Rathma.

“Everywhere. Be not impatient to face Inarius,” the Ancient replied. “You will do that soon enough.”

The edyrem formed a great circle. They had no choice. Uldyssian would have liked to have created a vast line with reserves in the rear but was hampered by Serenthia’s discovery. Surely the demons intended to attack him from behind once his people were occupied by those before them. It was the strategy he would have used and that Rathma agreed made sense. That forced him to rely on the circle.

Most of the edyrem were to focus on the Inquisitors, but enough kept sentinel on every other direction so that warning could go out and some of those facing the front could immediately shift their attention wherever needed. Despite the complexity already inherent in the situation because of such planning, Uldyssian had also kept the edyrem constantly on the move...until now.

Serenthia readied her spear. “They’re almost upon us!” She seemed more eager than most to throw herself into the fight. “Give the word, Uldyssian!”

But he held back, trying to decipher what else the Prophet might have in mind. Unfortunately, nothing was apparent, and the massive charge was closing fast.

He saw no other choice. He let the edyrem strike.

A wave of blackened earth shot up, rising well above the oncoming riders. Guided by Uldyssian, the edyrem sent it crashing down on the first ranks.

Men and horses screamed as tons of stone and dirt buried them. Only a few managed to escape the crashing wall, one of them the female priest leading the charge. Her mount was not so fortunate, though, all but its forelegs crushed under the magical onslaught.

However, those behind did not even pause but drove their animals *over* the carnage. There clearly existed no desire for them but for the edyrem's blood.

And worse, from the vast burial site Uldyssian's followers had just created, several robed forms burrowed to the surface. Death should have claimed those the spell had struck, but the power Inarius funneled through his minions had saved many. Bereft of their horses, they grabbed whatever weapons they could locate and simply ran behind their mounted brethren, shrieking for the enemy's death.

Only a few paces now separated the two sides. Uldyssian had time for only one more attack, which he set into motion. Despite the rain, the edyrem readily created a veritable storm of their own, fireballs that bombarded the Inquisitors with the ferocity of lightning.

This time, the attack had more effect. Several riders were blasted from their mounts. Many became fireballs in their own right, transforming into blazing corpses that dropped among their unsuspecting comrades. There was no doubting the fates of those struck; little enough remained of them that could even be identified as human.

But although the first wave of the edyrem's attack proved quite effective, subsequent ones garnered little success. Suddenly, the Inquisitors were better able to shield themselves. Fireballs dissipated harmlessly against their breastplates. The Cathedral's minions were no longer even slowed.

And moments later, the first of them collided with Uldyssian's band.

He had already prepared his followers for combat, but the edyrem were at first hard pressed. The lack of outright success against the Inquisitors had dampened their confidence enough to allow the warriors to push in the right side of the circle. It might have collapsed entirely if not for Serenthia and Jonas guiding the others in immediately rebuilding the ranks.

The curved swords and spiked maces of the Inquisitors clashed with the edyrem's varied assortment of salvaged weapons and farm implements, yet the struggle was anything but ordinary.

Both sides fueled their fight with the gifts they had. The Prophet's warriors—often acting in inhuman unison—drove hard into their foes. Inquisitors and edyrem alike struck with weapons that flashed with raw energy when meeting each other. But the latter had other tools at

their disposal as well. More than one robed warrior would suddenly rise into the air and go flying across the field of combat. Others fell as hovering edyrem tossed more potent missiles than previously used among the Inquisitors' ranks. The sky as much as the ground became the site of what Uldyssian already thought of as the Battle of the Golden Path.

The place where the edyrem might be making their last stand.

Horses shrieked as silver bolts peppered the Inquisitor ranks. However, despite mounting losses, the robed riders continued their relentless assault, battering away with their glittering maces against the mighty, invisible shields of the edyrem. Although those shields mostly held well, the sheer fanaticism of the Inquisitors' attacks was daunting even to the most hardened.

It became, at least for the time being, a frustrating stalemate. However, Uldyssian knew that a stalemate only meant eventual victory for Inarius. The longer the edyrem struggled uselessly, the more strength they expended. Unlike the Inquisitors, who drew from their powerful master, the edyrem only had what was within themselves.

All the while that Uldyssian struggled with that knowledge, he nevertheless fought hard. A robed warrior who attempted to batter in his skull instead lost his weapon to the son of Diomedes, who then sent the mace barreling through the man's chest. Breastplate, flesh, and bone did nothing even to slow the missile—which then burst out the back. Uldyssian found that he had no compassion whatsoever for those he fought; they had already killed too many innocents in their zealous adoration of the Prophet.

A massive whirlwind clearly of no natural origin suddenly cut through the edyrem, seeking to pluck them selectively from the ground. Uldyssian spotted the priests responsible for the oncoming catastrophe, but before he himself could do anything, Serenthia suddenly appeared among them. She drove her spear through one, then kicked another hard in the chest. That priest went flying far into the sea of Inquisitors still rushing forward.

Swearing more at Serenthia for risking herself than anything else, Uldyssian clapped his hands together in the direction in which the merchant's daughter fought.

The booming sound he created plowed a path through the enemy, bowling them over as if they were nothing. He then raced toward her, his leaping gait nearly flying.

He bounded among the Inquisitors closing on her and seized two by their necks. His rage caused both men literally to explode. He then raised his left hand and summoned into it a black broadsword formed from the ash that had once been the deadly grass. With that blade, the

son of Diomedes cut through one opponent after another, until at last he reached Serenthia.

She, meanwhile, finished off a third priest entirely unaware of how near she had been to being slain. Serenthia looked up at Uldyssian, her strained countenance almost as unnerving as those of the magically enhanced fanatics with whom they were struggling.

He knew why immediately. "Serry! Get back among the others!"

"I'm all right! Don't worry about me!"

"Serry! Achilios might not be gone! Do you want to die not knowing?"

Before she could answer, a terrible thud shook the ground. Men toppled everywhere.

Another thud followed the first. Uldyssian also felt the air grow very cold.

It was also, he realized, no longer raining...or, at least, no water was dropping from the sky.

There were, however, huge fragments of *ice* plummeting from the clouds, some of them as large as wagons. Uldyssian looked up and saw that there was still rain, but midway down, it was all coalescing together and freezing into the mammoth blocks now threatening all.

Once again, Inarius had taken Uldyssian's work—the cloud cover—and twisted it into a fiendish assault. That it also slew his own followers meant nothing, just as long as the rebels perished.

The monstrous ice chunks did what the Inquisitors could not, shattering the cohesiveness of the edyrem circle. Too many were not powerful enough to deal with such a fearsome threat. Men and women ran wherever they could, hoping to avoid being crushed like insects.

The Cathedral's warriors made good use of their disorganization, heedless or uncaring of the threat the ice caused them as well. More than one of Uldyssian's followers perished with a blazing sword through the back or a gleaming mace spilling open their skulls. That some Inquisitors were caught unable to escape Inarius's magic did nothing to counter the horror that they reaped.

Furious, Uldyssian dismissed the black sword, grabbed Serenthia by the wrist, and returned both of them to among the edyrem. He immediately reached out to those nearest, reassuring them as best he could and *demanding* their help. Most listened. He hoped they were enough for what he intended.

"Focus with me, Serry!" he all but shouted in her face. With great reluctance, the raven-tressed woman nodded. Immediately, her mind and his were almost one, with the others he had reached adding to their will.

A vast shadow loomed over the pair. Uldyssian did not need to look

up to know what it was and how little time he had.

Be with me, he told the others again.

The shadow darkened. Uldyssian sensed the massive block of ice just above.

Gritting his teeth, he thrust both hands skyward.

The explosion utterly shattered the gargantuan block. Yet the pieces did not come raining down but rather flew with purpose through the air. They struck other huge chunks of ice even as the latter formed, shattering those, too.

Eyes shut from strain, heart beating faster, Uldyssian imagined the dramatic scene above him. He saw with far more accuracy than his mortal eyes could where each fragment had to strike to avert more slaughter.

And when at last it seemed Inarius could not keep pace with his efforts, Uldyssian took the thousands and thousands of sharp pieces and threw them down upon the bulk of the Inquisitor legions. He threw them with as much force as he could, defying the power that the Prophet fed his servants to save them from this peril.

The needlelike shards dove toward the ground with a swiftness that left in their wakes a high, hissing sound. The Inquisitors gazed up to see their deaths coming. They used their power to try to prevent the oncoming missiles from reaching them...used that power and still failed utterly to stop even one.

The shards drove through metal, flesh, and bone without pause. Eyes and mouths were punctured with ease. In mere seconds, men became nothing more than quivering pincushions, so many were the icy missiles that dropped upon them.

The screams rose to a crescendo, then quickly died down. So swift was the slaughter that for the space of a single heartbeat, more than half of the Inquisitors still stood. Their bodies were drenched with blood, and their ruined countenances were slack, but they stood.

Then, as one, the might of the Cathedral crumpled like rag dolls to the unforgiving ground. The bodies lay sprawled at all angles.

Of the many Inarius had sent, only those mixed among the edyrem yet survived. Their numbers, though, dropped quickly as Uldyssian's people vented their fury for the deaths of their own on the Cathedral's survivors.

Momentarily sickened by events, Uldyssian fought to stop the executions. He succeeded, but only after far too many more were slain. The rest of the Inquisitors were slowly rounded up, although what to do with them was a question for which he had no answer.

As he stumbled among the dead, his eyes watching for whatever next the Prophet would send at them, the son of Diomedes ran across

a figure he had not seen since early on. It was the gray-haired priestess who had been leading the riders. Unlike the rest, she had no discernible mark on her, yet she was definitely dead. Her open eyes stared up at him almost accusingly.

“Master Uldyssian?”

His inspection of the body was interrupted by wiry Jonas. The bald former brigand moved toward him with tentative steps.

There were red, liquid lines across the right side of his face, but otherwise he was unharmed.

“Jonas! Did you see what happened to this one?”

The edyrem glanced at the priestess. “Nay. Was she of some import?”

Giving it some thought, Uldyssian shook his head. “Not anymore.”

The other man peered sharply at him. “Master Uldyssian! You look all done in! Let me give you a hand....”

The son of Diomedes was tempted, but he could show no weakness now. Whatever reprieve that they had been given was certain to be a short one. He waved off the hand. “It’s not necessary....”

“As you wish, Master Uldyssian,” the Parthan returned abruptly. With an equally curt bow, Jonas quickly retreated. “I will go see to the others.”

Even as he rushed off, Uldyssian became aware of someone coming from the opposite direction. He turned to find Mendeln. “Well?”

Uldyssian’s brother knew exactly what he asked. “There are many dead. Many. If I had to guess, I would say nearly a quarter of our number since this first began.”

“Nearly a quarter...” So many lives lost. It was made worse by the fact that although the Cathedral had suffered far, far greater, those lives meant nothing to the true enemy. Inarius considered his dead servants less than nothing.

The thought stirred Uldyssian’s rage anew.

Mendeln quickly took hold of his shoulder. “Uldyssian, do not let this happen to you again! Each time you permit your base emotions to rise to the forefront, you risk losing mastery of your powers. Think about it! Would that not play into Inarius’s hands?”

His brother had a point, but Uldyssian kept seeing all those who had perished here. Even the woman at his feet, who had obviously served as one of the Prophet’s chief acolytes, was a victim of the angel’s madness.

“Uldyssian...listen to me....”

But he no longer paid any mind to Mendeln, for at that moment, Uldyssian spotted something on the corpse that made every muscle tense. He quickly bent down and examined the face. With trepidation,

Uldyssian turned the priestess's head to the side in order to get a better look.

"Mendeln, look at this."

His black-robed sibling bent near, and a gasp escaped Mendeln. "By the dragon!"

There were two dark lesions near the ear, lesions whose origins were unmistakable.

"Malic!" Mendeln whispered. "He was among us!"

"You didn't notice him?"

The younger brother shook his head. "I must be near, and even then it would take a moment. Malic..."

"Inarius never runs out of tricks." Uldyssian surveyed the body, seeking again the cause of death. He needed badly to find a cause. A single wound. A cracked gap at the back of the skull. Anything.

But there was no mark.

Uldyssian looked around, but the nearest edyrem were far away. "We can't have this now, Mendeln! I can't concentrate on both him and Inarius—"

"Malic is my mistake," Mendeln hissed, his eyes narrowed in self-loathing. "My curse to bear. I was reckless, and because of that, I let a fiend as terrible as any demon back into the world." He straightened. "I will deal with him. You must focus on Inarius only."

They both knew that there was far more of an impending threat than just the renegade angel, but Inarius was indeed the imminent problem. Nothing else would matter if they failed to defeat him.

Still, Uldyssian could not help considering their new problem—and a possible answer finally came to him. "He was here. He was the only one nearby."

"Who?"

"Jonas." Now that he thought more about it, Uldyssian recalled also what he felt had been the Parthan's odd behavior. "Yes...it's Jonas, damn it!"

That was all Mendeln evidently needed. He held the ivory dagger ready. It glowed with a deathly light. "I will find him. He will not escape this time."

Neither suggested telling the others of the monster in their midst. That would be the final panic as edyrem turned on one another believing Malic was about to take over their bodies. The high priest was invisible to Uldyssian's senses, and that no doubt had to do with Inarius. That meant that none of the others—save perhaps Mendeln—could sense Malic, either.

Worse, who was to say the specter even looked like Jonas anymore?

He could not think about it. Uldyssian had to trust Mendeln.

Mendeln would not let him down.

Rathma suddenly stood next to him. It said something for Uldyssian's current mood that he found no surprise in the Ancient's abrupt arrival. Such things were becoming much too commonplace for the former farmer.

"I have a thought," Rathma declared.

"Those are never good. What is it?"

The Ancient cocked his head, then granted Uldyssian his point. "This one has the hopes of being something better...at least, I think so."

"Does it have the same chance of success that your visit to your father had?" the mortal asked with open sarcasm in his tone.

"More than that." Rathma pursed his lips. "But possibly not much more."

Uldyssian was more concerned with what Inarius was currently plotting. He glanced to the north but only saw the Cathedral of Light. Something was brewing, though. Inarius would not remain idle....

"We can't do anything to help you this time."

The cowed figure wrapped his cloak tight about him. His inhumanly handsome face held no emotion. "I expect none. But this must be attempted."

There was obviously no talking Rathma out of whatever it was that he thought he needed to do, but Uldyssian wanted at least to know what the Ancient thought so important that he would leave the edyrem at such a juncture. "Just tell me what you think you can accomplish. Where are you going this time?"

His face as still as death, Inarius's son casually replied, "I'm going for what help I might be able to find. I'm calling a family gathering...."

Mendeln rushed among the edyrem, no doubt looking to them like death itself come to gather more victims. For all their might, even the most skilled of his brother's followers looked away as he passed. Only one of his handful of "students" acknowledged him, but he immediately indicated to her that he was on a task demanding the utmost privacy.

Of necessity, Uldyssian's brother paused now and then to ask some unsettled edyrem if they had seen the Parthan. Most had not, but finally two directed him toward where they had last noticed him. Not at all confident that he would still find the false Jonas there, Mendeln nonetheless vigorously pursued his only lead.

He continued to hold the dagger in front of him, but thus far, it had

given no sign that he was near the ghoulish shade. Mendeln eyed everyone he passed, seeking whether one of them might be Malic's latest host.

Inarius's attacks and the edyrem's defenses had left much of the area churned up. The massive chunks of ice had raised entire hills when they had come crashing down, and although they were now rapidly melting, they, too, created more barriers, more places around which to hide.

But as Mendeln neared one particularly jagged hill, his sharp eyes caught sight of something pale peeking out from the unstable rubble. At the same time, he sensed the wrongness that was Malic in the nearby vicinity.

A spell ready on his lips, Uldyssian's brother approached whatever it was the upturned stone and dirt all but covered. With caution, he used his free hand to brush some of the rubble away.

A scarred, bone-white elbow revealed itself. It was a body, just as he had assumed, but it did not wear the garments of Jonas. That it was very likely Parthan—for there was none of the light-skinned Kehjani among the edyrem—was all Mendeln could tell of it. He dismissed the corpse quickly, still aware that Malic had to be close by.

He would have asked the ghosts, but since the moment Uldyssian and the rest had entered the grasslands, all the ghosts had vanished. Even those of the recent dead had not remained in the vicinity, as was usual. It was as if they dared not stay near the confrontation. Mendeln was frustrated by the lack of such company. Now, more than ever, he could have used their eyes, their knowledge.

From the north, there suddenly came what sounded—impossibly—like a glorious chorus. Light glistened above him, a fantastic light reflected by the huge chunk of ice. That light also illuminated everything save the area shadowed by the churned ground.

Mendeln froze. He knew what the light and the chorus presaged.

Inarius had finally entered the fray.

For the moment, all thought of Malic vanished as Mendeln concerned himself with Uldyssian and the angel. He wanted to rush to his brother's side, even though he knew that Serenthia and Rathma would already be there. He had sworn to himself that when the Prophet appeared, he, too, would face him.

But Malic could not be ignored.

The dagger flared.

Mendeln started to turn.

He could only imagine that it was because of his swift reaction that his skull was not cracked open. Even still, the rock in Malic's fist sent shock waves through Mendeln's head. Uldyssian's brother collapsed

against the hill.

Through blurry eyes, he beheld Jonas's leering face. The smile was exactly as he recalled Malic's.

"A crude method, but effective," remarked the specter, holding forth the rock. "I dared not use a spell other than to add to the masking shield. We wanted you to notice me just enough and no more...."

We. That could only mean Inarius had planned this with the shade. "You—" Mendeln's head ached. "This moment was to—"

"This moment was all arranged, if that is what you mean!" Throwing away the rock, the bald figure retrieved Mendeln's dagger. "This should help." Malic reached into a pouch on Jonas's belt, removing from it a red stone. "Between the two, I should have no trouble taking your body this time."

Mendeln could not fathom why Malic would want a body so badly injured, but then he realized that his head wound was not life-threatening. He was merely stunned, something that would not affect the ghost.

As for why Malic would want him at all, the answer was obvious. Mendeln ul-Diomed *would* stand by his brother's side—and then with a touch steal Uldyssian's body while simultaneously killing the older sibling.

And hardly lifting a finger, the Prophet would defeat his adversary.

Mendeln sought to focus his thoughts enough to cast a spell, but too late he realized that the high priest had struck with calculation. He had never meant to hit his victim anywhere but where he had and Mendeln had foolishly obliged him by turning as planned. Better if Uldyssian's brother had simply stood with his back to the creature, for then perhaps Malic would have killed him.

In actuality, that was doubtful. Malic was not so careless. He wanted Uldyssian's body, and the only way to achieve that was through Mendeln.

"You—you are being used!" the son of Diomedes managed. "Inarius—the angels—"

Malic grinned. "Will find that the fate of Sanctuary is beyond their control."

And suddenly, Mendeln recalled what Serenthia had found, that demonic hordes waited to attack. But they were not in league with Inarius anymore. Instead, they prepared to battle over Sanctuary and its humans, especially the edyrem, with Tyrael's host.

And the high priest intended to profit by that, assuming—perhaps wrongly—that the Burning Hells would triumph. Uldyssian's brother considered pointing out the risk the double-dealing ghost was taking

but chose not to. More important than Malic's plot was the fact that Mendeln at last felt his head clearing. The words he had sought came back to him. He blurted out the first—

Malic held the red stone before his eyes. Immediately, Mendeln could not help but stare at it. His spell died on his lips.

"Your gaze cannot escape," mocked the specter, leaning close. "Your mind cannot think save to hear me."

His victim sought to protest but could not. Mendeln's last coherent thought was that he could expect no aid from anyone else, for they were all focused upon Inarius's coming.

Beyond the crystal, Malic raised the dagger. It was not his intention to stab Mendeln but to use the ethereal weapon's magic against its owner.

"So very close now..." The shade's words echoed in Mendeln's numbed mind. "Soon—"

Without warning, the mesmerizing stone vanished from sight. Mendeln blinked. His brain and body seemed disconnected from each other, but his ears apparently worked, for they registered the sounds of struggle. Uldyssian's brother tried to clear his vision—

And as he did, he beheld Jonas—no, Malic—battling with someone who held the high priest's wrists from behind. The hand wielding the dagger thrust straight up as the two fought over it. Of the crystal, there was no sign.

But all that mattered to Mendeln was just who had come to his rescue, the person he would have least expected.

Achilios.

Twenty

The invisible chorus was the first hint of his coming. The perfect voices sang their wordless praises from seemingly every direction. They were both beautiful and awful to hear, for although they touched even Uldyssian's heart, they also reminded him that they presaged the coming of the Prophet.

Indeed, even as the edyrem came to grips with the unseen singers, a blaze of wondrous light erupted from the Cathedral. It burned away the clouds in that direction. It was blinding, yet no one who gazed at it could look away.

And in its midst, the golden figure of the Prophet—riding in a glittering diamond chariot pulled by two winged horses—materialized several yards above the startled rebels. The glorious youth was clad for battle, his armor gleaming, the shining, bejeweled sword at his side sharp enough to cut the very air.

He reined the chariot to a halt while it was still several feet above the ground. The Prophet looked over the edyrem. "My wayward children," he began, smiling sadly. "Led astray as surely as if by demons..."

Somewhere behind Uldyssian, a man sobbed. The son of Diomedes quickly sent a reassuring touch to the minds of all his followers.

Inarius stepped away from the chariot—which then faded away. He slowly descended to the ground as if walking down a flight of nonexistent steps. As he did, behind him, the brilliant glow magnified.

"Let those who would seek my forgiveness fall to their knees," commanded Inarius.

Aware that even the slightest of words spoken by the angel had the strength to demand absolute obedience, Uldyssian silently roared, *Keep standing!*

Uldyssian could not entirely be certain if his own order had succeeded, but Inarius's expression did grow more disappointed. That was enough to encourage the mortal.

"So many determined unbelievers as that...too many unbelievers." The Prophet steeped his hands, then shook his head. "Too many unbelievers. The world must be cleansed."

And as he opened his hands again, a searing white force swept over Uldyssian and the rest.

“Mendeln!” called Achilios. “You...must...stop him!”

Uldyssian’s brother sought to rise, but his body would not obey his commands properly. There had been magic in the head blow, he now understood. His continually scattered thoughts and weakness were not merely by chance.

Letting out a growl, Malic tore the hand bearing the crystal from Achilios’s grip. He immediately thrust his palm against the archer’s side.

Aware of just what that would do, Mendeln let out a gasp. He teetered to his feet, but far too late to stop the high priest’s foul work.

But Malic and Achilios merely stood there for a moment, their eyes locked upon each other’s. From Jonas’s mouth erupted furious and somewhat confused words. “Not possible! I cannot possess you! I cannot make your life mine!”

“Your lord...Lucion...did that already,” muttered Achilios. “There’s no more...no more life to take, you...you bastard!”

“Then there are other ways to be rid of you!”

Somehow, Mendeln managed to throw himself toward the pair. He collided with Malic’s back just as the latter uttered something that made the crimson stone flare bright.

Achilios fell back as if hit by a bolt of lightning. However, in doing so, he wrenched Mendeln’s dagger free. Uldyssian’s brother and Malic went crashing into the side of the makeshift hill.

A strong hand gripped Mendeln’s throat tightly. Malic squeezed.

Mendeln did the only thing of which he could think. He grabbed some of the dirt and threw it in Malic’s face.

The high priest coughed as much of the dirt filled his mouth and nose. Unfortunately, his grip did not weaken much.

But it was still enough to enable Mendeln to recover his wits somewhat. With his voice cut off by the specter’s hand, he concentrated on the one thing that might serve him. He had done it before. If it would only work now—

The ivory dagger materialized in his left hand.

Mendeln drove it into the body once belonging to Jonas, praying that he would hit some spot vital to Malic. Unfortunately, Malic tried to block his arm, and the blade sank lower, cutting into an area that Uldyssian’s brother knew might hurt the high priest a bit but certainly would not destroy him.

Yet the specter howled wildly as soon as the blade even touched, so wildly, in fact, that Mendeln had to release the dagger and cover his ears. From what had been Jonas’s mouth, there erupted a wind that buffeted the black-robed figure as if it were a tornado.

Despite the dagger still deep in his lower torso, Malic managed to

rise. All the while, though, he continued to howl in agony. Jonas's face became a parody of itself, the eyes growing too wide, the mouth a gaping hole large enough to swallow a small child and growing larger yet.

The bulging eyes gazed furiously at the blade. Congealing blood dripped from the wound, but to Mendeln's gaze, the cut should not have been a deadly one. He finally understood what was actually happening. The dagger itself was anathema to the dread shadow, its magic slowly but surely consuming him.

Malic evidently realized that, too, for, clutching at the hilt with one hand, he desperately sought to remove it. Fearing what would happen if he succeeded, Mendeln again flung himself at the high priest. He caught Malic just below the lungs. Uldyssian's brother planted both hands over Malic's, trying to force the dagger to remain embedded.

Still howling, the ghost used his other hand to grasp for Mendeln's eyes. Mendeln forced himself to endure Malic's attack. The howling grew more incessant; he felt certain that if he could just keep the dagger in a little longer—

Malic's head bent back beyond living limits. The bone cracked, the sound sickening Mendeln. Still, the ghoulish figure shrieked.

Then a thick black substance like tar flew up out of Malic's mouth. It shot into the air above Uldyssian's brother, pouring out of what had once been Jonas like a geyser. It was accompanied by a stench that reminded Mendeln of rotting flesh and vegetation mixed together.

The last of it issued forth. The figure before Mendeln teetered, and then the corpse collapsed like parchment in his arms.

Above there was one last, long shriek. It finally ended when the floating black tar melted into nothing.

But the effort had been too much for Mendeln. His head wound pounded more than ever. Vertigo overtook Rathma's student. Even the weight of the emaciated body was more than he could handle. Uldyssian's brother fell back, the corpse draping across him.

Mendeln blacked out before he hit the ground.

The edyrem were scattered like leaves in the wind as the Prophet's hands spread apart. Even Uldyssian was nearly swept away. At the last, he dug his feet into the scorched land, pushing forward despite the angel's fearsome spell.

And as he battled Inarius's work, he strained to keep his tie to each and every one of his people, reassuring them and guiding them. Through Uldyssian, the edyrem began to regain their ground, and they, in turn, helped to strengthen him.

Gritting his teeth, Uldyssian thrust his hands forward. He focused on the Prophet.

The wind instantly vanished, but not because the angel had ceased his assault. Rather, it was now because the son of Diomedes had summoned a wall of solid air that spread all the way across the charred grasslands, protecting everyone behind it. The power of the Prophet buffeted his creation with such force that Uldyssian's every muscle strained, but the wall held.

Then Uldyssian sensed some slight shift from Inarius. The gale-force wind faltered, finally ceasing entirely. It was almost as if something had happened not to Inarius's liking, something significant enough to distract him.

Although he had no idea just what that might have been, Uldyssian immediately used the hesitation to his advantage. He sent the invisible wall barreling into the Prophet with all the strength that he and the added wills of the edyrem could muster.

The landscape around the golden-haired youth exploded. Vast chunks of dirt and stone flew back. The sky above the Prophet was briefly darkened with ash that had once been the malevolent grass.

Inarius, the grand helmet blown from his head, took one step back...and that was it. As dirt rained down behind him, he eyed Uldyssian. The Prophet looked untouched, but his expression had changed. There was a terrible coldness in it that almost made Uldyssian flinch.

"Such impudence!" Inarius roared in a voice magnified by his magic. "And such foolishness! You would raise yourself up so high, you who are less than the worms that burrow through the ground? I offered you absolution, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, time and time again, but you remain the darkest of unbelievers, the most arrogant of heretics." His eyes flashed, no longer human even as pretense. Now they were the blazing orbs of the angel. "There is nothing left for you but death."

The grasslands burst into white flame. Uldyssian screamed as the holy fire burned at his flesh. He felt the additional consternation of the edyrem, who were likewise assailed.

"I will cleanse my world!" Inarius continued. "I will make it perfect again!"

Now the screams of the others filled Uldyssian's ears. They were all about to be burned alive because he had sorely underestimated the fury of the Prophet.

No—the vision of so many slaughtered because they had simply believed in him and his words tore once more at Uldyssian. He could not let them suffer for his sins. Better he take from the others the punishment Inarius meted out and turn it on himself, who deserved it.

Imagining the white flames, Uldyssian drew them with his will to engulf only him. He took the sum of the Prophet's monstrous retribution and let it fall on his own person. The pain was savage, and it felt as if his skin sloughed off, yet still Uldyssian embraced the flames.

But as he did, a strange thing happened. The edyrem knew what he planned, that he sought to save them at cost to him. Serenthia was among the first. Rather than merely allow fate to take its course, she sought with her lesser skills to douse the celestial fire. She was joined by a few others, then more and more, until nearly all the edyrem battled to rescue their leader.

And although it strained them beyond their known limits, they finally eradicated the Prophet's fire. Even more surprising, their power instantly healed Uldyssian's savage burns and soothed his ruined nerves.

In managing this miracle, the edyrem also presented a revelation to Uldyssian. He stared at Inarius and, while it might have been a trick of his eye, thought that the angel *flinched* ever so slightly.

"This is no longer your world," the son of Diomedes informed the Prophet in a voice now also magnified. "And if it should perish this day, at least all will know that it did so free of you. We are our own now, Inarius, and in our power, our belief, we are united against you, the angels, or demons!"

With that, Uldyssian leapt at the Prophet.

Whether it was his audacity, hesitation on the part of Inarius, or that the angel wished him to come, the human reached his adversary without any interference. The gleaming youth met Uldyssian's outstretched hands with his own, and the two grappled. The ground shook as their feet planted firmly, and raw energy crackled between them.

"You compound your crimes over and over," Inarius quietly declared into his face. The Prophet's eyes were blinding, and his perfect smile no longer revealed uncertainty.

But Uldyssian dared not let the imposing sight eat away at his own confidence. Matching Inarius's tone, he retorted, "Then if there's no hope of me seeing *your* light, you should stop prattling and do something."

The angel's eyes seemed to flash a little angrier. He said nothing more, but suddenly the ground beneath Uldyssian began to liquefy. The human's feet sank in up to the ankle, then the legs began to follow.

Inarius pressed down on him. The Prophet's strength was tremendous, and although Uldyssian could match it, his sinking set

him more and more at a deadly disadvantage.

He realized that he was still thinking in mortal terms, whereas Inarius did not. Uldyssian did not have to let his descent continue; he had the power to counter it.

With only that thought, he made it happen. Uldyssian rose, once again facing the Prophet eye-to-eye. He felt the ground solidify.

Grinning darkly, Uldyssian then twisted his hands around and threw the Prophet up into the air. Inarius spun over and over, and for a moment, Uldyssian looked victorious.

But as he tumbled, the Prophet transformed. The image of the perfect youth burned away. Tendrils of brightly colored energy blossomed from his back, and he grew in size. His face melted into what was part shadow, part visor.

Midway through the air, Inarius righted himself. He hovered above Uldyssian, radiant in his celestial glory. From what he could sense, Uldyssian knew that everyone else also saw the Prophet in his true form.

I HAVE BEEN PATIENT WITH YOU, MORTAL.... I HAVE TRIED TO TEMPER MY FURY AND GRANT YOU A DEATH INVOLVING SOME SWIFTNESS AND LESS PAIN! YOU HAVE NOT BEEN GRATEFUL, THOUGH.

The angel's voice shook both Uldyssian's mind and soul. It truly felt as if Inarius spoke from within him as well as without.

YOU RETAIN THIS FALSE BELIEF, the winged warrior continued. THAT YOU HAVE ANY CHOICE BUT TO DIE! YOU WILL UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS NO OTHER WAY.... I AM SANCTUARY, AND SANCTUARY IS I! YOU SEEK TO FIGHT THE VERY WORLD ITSELF WHEN YOU SEEK TO STAND AGAINST ME.

The wind picked up again. The clouds—no longer Uldyssian's to control—spun and churned with wild abandon. The ground heaved, settled, then heaved again.

Uldyssian felt Inarius drawing upon the Worldstone and understood just how little of it the angel had thus far utilized. He was astounded and dismayed by what he now faced and at last also saw why the renegade had so little concern over facing a host of his own kind. How could even a thousand angelic warriors—or a hundred times that number—face such might?

YOU PERCEIVE YOUR ERROR, Inarius mocked. ALBEIT MUCH TOO LATE! The Prophet spread wide his arms, as if he sought to embrace the world and all in it. BUT YOU HAVE PERFORMED ME ONE SERVICE, ULDYSSIAN UL-DIOMED! YOU HAVE SHOWN ME THAT FOR MY WORLD TO BE AS IT SHOULD BE, I MUST NOT WEAR TRAPPINGS UNWORTHY OF MY GLORY! ALL SANCTUARY WILL

FROM HERE ON KNOW OF MY GREATNESS, MY PERFECTION, AS I REMAKE IT INTO MY IMAGE.

The charade would be over. Assuming that Inarius defeated all his enemies—a feat not impossible, it now was apparent—Inarius would rule as himself, demanding utter mastery, utter obedience, over all that he would allow to live. The Prophet had removed his veil; all would know him and fear his celestial wrath.

And all would curse the son of Diomedes for his failure, for his sins against their god.

HERE SHALL IT BE MARKED, FOR ALL ETERNITY, THE PLACE WHERE THIS WORLD WAS SET RIGHT! HERE SHALL BE CONSTRUCTED A NEW EDIFICE HONORING THE BEGINNING OF MY TRANSFORMATION OF THIS WRETCHED MISTAKE TO PERFECTION INCARNATE.

Inarius gestured at the ground before Uldyssian. The tremor that shook the area this time was of a magnitude far greater than any previous. The ground burst up with such ferocity that Uldyssian was tossed high into the air.

With a second gesture, the angel paused the human's flight. *BEHOLD...*

A tower of dirt and rock taller than any building Uldyssian had ever seen—even the grand Cathedral—formed under the angel's direction. As it continued to swell in size, it also molded itself. Sharp angles came into being. Arched windows lined the sides. Magnificent reliefs and statues—all of Inarius—formed fully on the walls and at the entrance of what was clearly more of a shrine rather than a new, glorious cathedral.

HERE AT THIS SITE, WHICH I SHALL CALL GETTERAC—THE GATE OF PARADISE—SHALL BE HONORED THIS DAY.... Inarius looked to his captive. *AND YOU, HERETIC, SHALL HAVE ONE HONOR...YOU SHALL FOREVER BE A PART OF THIS SITE, YOUR BONES AT THE CENTER OF IT AS TESTAMENT TO THIS LAST, FEEBLE STAND AGAINST WHAT IS MY RIGHT....*

Against such a staggering display, Uldyssian's will weakened. Perhaps it was better to let this all come to pass. At least, if Inarius was indeed so formidable, then Sanctuary and some of its people would survive. With the son of Diomedes dead, even the edyrem might be forgiven for their transgressions.

But even as Uldyssian began to give in, Inarius's gargantuan monument to his victory shook as if a new tremor had begun. Yet only the structure shook, nothing else.

The entire edifice ripped free and flew directly at the angel, crashing into him with a wrath that shocked Uldyssian. He suddenly

began falling again, but his drop ended only a moment later as the air underneath him grew thick enough to hold his weight.

Only when that happened did Uldyssian's wits return enough for him to understand that yet again, his people had come to his salvation. They had not cared what Inarius might do to them because of it; they would live and die with their leader, whatever the overall fate of their world.

It was very likely that such a wish would soon be granted, too, for barely had the edyrem's amazing missile collided with Inarius than it exploded into thousands and thousands of tiny fragments that fell upon Uldyssian and the others as if shot by a sling. Several among the edyrem crumpled, slain by rocks or chunks of hard dirt that cracked their skulls or crushed in their ribs.

Uldyssian began dropping again, but now his mind was clear enough to enable him to slow his descent. His mind was clear in many other ways as well, for only then did the son of Diomedes recognize that his surrender to his fate had been as much an intricate use of the angel's influence on his thoughts as it had his own beliefs. Inarius had subtly taken his fears and twisted them to his desire. If not for the desperate efforts of his followers, Uldyssian would have willingly surrendered to his own execution.

But now surrender was the furthest thing from his desires. Instead, disgust with himself and with the hubris of the angel overwhelmed Uldyssian. It mattered not whether he perished, as long as no more of those who believed in him suffered.

He felt the power surge within him, and whether or not it was enough to bring down Inarius, Uldyssian did not care. He would do everything within his ability to end it here and now.

If that were possible at all.

The renegade angel saw him approach. Inarius merely opened his arms as he had earlier, this time seemingly to invite the mortal to him. Uldyssian obliged his foe.

He was nearly upon the angel when Inarius abruptly flicked his armored hand toward the upstart human. The very air about Uldyssian crackled. He felt as if a thousand hooks ripped away at his flesh, his eyes...all of him.

But where this might have previously caused him to falter, it now did not slow Uldyssian in the least. He hurtled forward regardless of the torture through which his body went, desiring only that he reach the winged figure.

When they collided this time, the crash split open the clouds above and sent a quake through the ground beneath. Uldyssian feared for the edyrem but could not risk any distraction. He and Inarius spun

through the air, each feeding into the other such forces as could have brought the city of Kehjan to rubble. Yet somehow the son of Diomedes staved off the fury flung at him by his adversary just as well as Inarius dispelled his own attack.

They crashed onto Sanctuary, their impact causing a new upheaval of dirt and stone. The two titans opened up a small valley in the wake of their collision, a valley they widened as they pushed against each other over and over.

Even in the harrowing midst of the epic struggle, there arose hope within Uldyssian. Inarius did not hold back, yet somehow the human continually matched him. Uldyssian did not ask by what miracle this could happen but used the very fact to fuel his will further. He now pressed Inarius back, all the while battering the angel with the raw forces within him.

Raw forces that suddenly made the winged warrior bend down before him.

“The world is no longer yours!” Uldyssian repeated to Inarius. “The fates of men are theirs to decide, not yours! This day’ll be marked, yes, but as the day of freedom for all Sanctuary from you!”

THERE IS NO SANCTUARY WITHOUT ME, the Prophet said defiantly. *WHETHER IN VICTORY OR DEFEAT.*

It was the first time Uldyssian had heard Inarius speak of anything other than the absolute certainty of his success. Encouraged, Uldyssian battered at the angel, sending both of them hurtling toward the Cathedral of Light. They struck the ground just before the gleaming citadel, a great fissure opening up as they hit. The Cathedral trembled, and cracks shot through its magnificent walls.

Screams arose, but they had nothing to do with the now-distant edyrem. Many were the Prophet’s acolytes, those that had had no place in the battle. To Uldyssian’s surprise, there were also scores and scores of pilgrims, many of them obviously from Kehjan.

As he and Inarius dragged each other up, Uldyssian once again faced the golden youth. The transformation distracted the son of Diomedes—apparently exactly what Inarius sought. From the angel’s mouth came not words but a shining silver sphere. It swelled, wrapping over Uldyssian until it had swallowed him whole, then tore him away from his adversary.

“To the end of all for you,” declared the Prophet, one hand raised toward the human. “There to suffer an emptiness far worse than death could ever be.”

The sphere began shrinking.

Uldyssian planted his hands on the smooth, inner surface of his prison. He had come too far to let this be his finish. His hands flared

black and melted away the barrier.

“There can be nothing worse than what I’ve already suffered because of you and Lilith,” Uldyssian grated. “You two belong in damnation together!”

He brought up the ground around both Inarius and the Cathedral. Those of the faithful who had not already fled in panic now did so as the spire cracked off and plummeted point down into the marble entrance. Tons of soil and rock flowed up and over the angel as great fragments of the shattered spire bounded toward him from behind.

But all of this was merely used by Uldyssian to create his own distraction. Inarius did not fear such devastation, not with his abilities. He reacted as the human intended, contemptuously waving his hand to dismiss what had been cast against him...and gaining Uldyssian the opportunity he needed once again to reach the mad celestial.

They crashed into the ruined entrance of the crumbling building. Each time they struck each other, the magic unleashed wreaked more chaos upon the land. At last, the roof of the Cathedral, no longer sufficiently supported by the ruined walls, caved in.

But even then, the pair saw only each other. The Prophet no longer spoke, and his shape twisted into some nightmarish form between his mortal guise and his true appearance. He flung such power at Uldyssian that the human expected to die a thousand times over, but the son of Diomedes continued to outduel the angel miraculously.

And it began to tell. Inarius’s attacks grew ever so slightly weaker. It was not any trick this time; Uldyssian could sense that. The angel was faltering. He very likely was not tired, but now uncertainty was eating at him as it had done to Uldyssian in the past.

Then Uldyssian struck Inarius a blow that sent the winged figure tumbling into the wreckage of his once-imposing sanctum. Uldyssian quickly fell upon the Prophet and began pounding away at him with all the forces he could summon from within. His strikes were such that lightning flashed each time he hit, and the ground was torn asunder.

He raised a fist surrounded by a black aura, a fist with which he intended the final blow—and suddenly his attention was snared by something other than Inarius. Uldyssian fought to ignore whatever it was, certain that the angel was simply seeking to create another distraction.

But then a faint voice penetrated the heat burning through his head.

Serenthia’s voice...pleading with him to look to the sky.

He did—and at that moment, Inarius became less than nothing to him. Their entire struggle, all the destruction and death that had taken

place because of their feud, none of it meant anything.

For now the sky looked as if it were not real, as if it were instead a vast drawing on a gargantuan piece of parchment. More impossible, that parchment had a vast rip running across it, a literal tear in the sky.

And through that tear flowed an astounding, breathtaking swarm of magnificent beings whose armor gleamed brighter than the sun and whose many wings created a dazzling display of colors unmatched upon the mortal plane.

The armed hosts of the High Heavens spilled out over the world.

Twenty-One

There seemed no end to their ranks. They flew through the unnatural tear by the hundreds, in the process making the gap widen so as to let those behind them enter in even greater numbers. Already, they filled a good portion of the heavens, and the clouds seemed to react to their presence by churning worse.

Uldyssian knew this had always been inevitable, but to watch the incredible spectacle unfold shook him to his very core. Inside, there had always been that minute hope that something would somehow prevent the angels from reaching Sanctuary, be it the work of Trag'Oul, some last-minute change of heart...or sheer prayer.

But none of that was to be. The end of the world was upon them.

Uldyssian screamed as his body was wracked with new, horrific agony. He was tossed backward into the air, and he faintly understood that Inarius had used the moment to save himself.

Uldyssian crashed to the ground a moment later, bouncing several times before coming to a stop. Astoundingly, he did not even come close to dying. His gifts had done what he had failed to do; they had protected him from both the Prophet's fury and the awful collision.

He had still hit hard enough to leave him stunned. Eyes tearing, he watched as vague visions of winged warriors continued to spread across everything. At that moment, Uldyssian wished that he had been slain. At least then he would not have had to endure the annihilation of all that he held dear.

A blinding light obscured all else. To Uldyssian's horror, Inarius, his true form once again revealed, hovered over him.

YOUR PUNISHMENT IS LONG OVERDUE, HERETIC! With a gesture, he dragged Uldyssian from the ground.

It was impossible to believe that Inarius could ignore what was happening above, but Uldyssian quickly saw that this was the truth. All that mattered in the renegade angel's eyes was retribution against Uldyssian.

It was so ludicrous that despite his pain, Uldyssian unleashed a laugh that bordered on madness. Sanctuary was about to fall, and he was the Prophet's only focus.

But then Inarius fluttered back from him, almost as if startled. Uldyssian did not understand why the angel should react so, any more than he understood the reason for him falling now that his foe's magic

no longer held him aloft.

WHAT...ARE YOU...DOING? demanded Inarius. *WHAT?*

The son of Diomedes frowned, wondering with whom the winged figure spoke. Inarius appeared to be looking at the human, but Uldyssian knew that *he* was not doing a single thing to defend himself.

Or was he? Uldyssian finally noticed that a warmth was spreading through his body, a warmth that ate away at the pain and healed any and all wounds he had suffered. As it reached his head, his mind, he felt a lifting of his spirit that he had not experienced since first awakening his abilities. His confidence soared, and suddenly he had utter command of his body again. A golden glow emanated from him, a glow so brilliant that it made the fiery wings of Inarius drab and sickly by comparison.

A glow that *blinded* his adversary.

Fully in command—no, *better* in command of himself than he had ever been before, Uldyssian gazed upon Inarius almost contemptuously. The renegade had done nothing with all the power that he had at his hand save conquer, condemn, or kill those he felt were imperfect or defiant. To him, there had been nothing worthy of life save himself.

The irony was, Inarius was far from worthy of the very humans he so despised. They had grown into something he could not comprehend, and Uldyssian represented the epitome of that.

Inarius abruptly slapped his gauntleted hands together, and a silver shard of energy sliced at the human. Uldyssian assumed that it was intended to cut him in twain. He dismissed it with a sneer, leaving the angel frozen in the air.

And while Inarius hovered there—to Uldyssian, obviously stunned by the mortal's refusal to accept his fate—the son of Diomedes stretched forth his open hand in the Prophet's direction. Yet it was not Inarius himself upon which Uldyssian focused. Instead, through eyes that saw so much more at the moment, he gazed upon the link between the angel and the Worldstone.

There was far more to the Worldstone than anyone else understood. That much was at least clear to Uldyssian. He also sensed that there were reasons he should not pursue that notion any further. What he had to do now, though, was finish what he had instinctively begun in the cavern where he had seen the great artifact.

Distance had no meaning where the Worldstone was concerned. Though it physically appeared to be hundreds of miles away, it was, in truth, *everywhere*, and so Uldyssian had no difficulty reaching out to it with his mind. He saw into its vast structure and located the anomaly he had created when standing before it with Rathma. Uldyssian had

been so close to making the bloody events of the past months something that need not have occurred. Then he had been blind.

But now he saw. It was only a matter of one more alteration in the impossible, six-sided facet he had formed.

Uldyssian made that adjustment....

And Inarius howled. He shimmered, and it seemed as if a part of him burned away. Physically, the angel appeared unchanged, yet as Uldyssian concentrated on him again, Inarius looked...much less. He was still what he was, a celestial warrior of tremendous might, but that might was nothing compared to what the Worldstone had enabled him to do.

Uldyssian had severed the renegade's link. Inarius no longer could call upon the Worldstone.

The angel continued to howl, but now that cry was tinged by rage. Inarius summoned his full power—and Uldyssian easily quashed his attempt.

He was about to do the same to the Prophet himself, but then once more, Uldyssian heard in his mind the calls of Serenthia and the others. This last confrontation between himself and Inarius had lasted but seconds as Sanctuary measured time, but even seconds were vital now.

"The fate of this world is no longer yours to dictate," he reminded the fallen angel for the last time. With that, he created a sphere much like the silver one into which Inarius had sought to cast him, then imprisoned his vanquished opponent within.

Inarius raged inside, but the sphere had been made to keep all sound locked with him. His silent tirade would have been almost humorous to watch if the son of Diomedes had not seen so many people suffer because of him.

Leaving the sphere to rest among the ruins of the Cathedral of Light, Uldyssian turned—

And a terrible jolt ran through him that sent him to his knees.

YOU WILL NOT INTERFERE WITH WHAT WILL BE, stated a voice that was very much like Inarius's yet was not.

Tyrael.

Uldyssian could not see the other angel, but he felt his power. Tyrael was naturally far stronger than Inarius. Uldyssian might have still defeated him easily, but the second angel had wisely used the Prophet's fury to hide his own efforts until it was too late for the human to notice.

Tyrael kept him down on his knees. *THE ABOMINATION THAT INARIUS CREATED SHALL BE CLEANSED FROM THE MEMORY OF THE UNIVERSE.... THE TAIN OF DEMON AND ANGEL TOGETHER*

SHALL BE RIGHTLY FORGOTTEN...AND JUSTICE SHALL BE SERVED....

"Who—whose justice?" Uldyssian snarled, seeking to fight both the pain and his invisible bonds.

But the angel ignored his question, instead declaring, *BEHOLD! THE PURIFICATION PROGRESSES.*

Despite himself, Uldyssian could not help but look, and he saw that it now literally rained angels. The celestial host dove in perfect order, row upon row spreading out in every direction over Sanctuary. All held ready fiery weapons—from swords to lances to scythes and more—which somehow Uldyssian understood were actually manifestations of their individual powers. With them, they prepared to sweep over the people and places and leave nothing but flame.

However, something happened next that surely Tyrael did not desire. From the ruined ground erupted huge, steaming craters. They blossomed without warning, sending the edyrem scattering. Uldyssian knew what they were, and his hopes for his home did not improve in the least, especially when the first scaled fiend leapt out to meet the angels.

The Burning Hells had come to have their say in the fate of Sanctuary.

The demons were not like the angels. They had no uniformity save their savageness. They did not come in rank upon rank but spilled out like water, quickly covering vast ground, then rising up into the sky.

Those among the host that had been heading to more distant parts of the world immediately veered around to join their brethren against the demons. They moved with a smoothness that made Uldyssian suspect they had awaited just this moment. Now, events did not focus on Sanctuary itself; instead, the end of his world and his people were becoming just part of the endless conflict between the two sides. Everyone would perish and then be forgotten as the angels and demons went on to their next conflict.

Forgotten as if they had never existed.

Achilios bent over Mendeln, fearful that his aid had come too late. Providence had taken a hand in his being here just when Uldyssian's brother and Malic had been struggling. Providence and, ironically, Inarius.

It was the angel's fault that the hunter had been nearby, for here was the area where the Prophet's sinister plants had been set to attack the unsuspecting edyrem in a first wave intended to demoralize them completely. Here Achilios had been buried all night, his face turned to

the depths of the world. He had truly believed himself trapped forever, even when he had heard through the packed soil the movements of Uldyssian's followers above.

The archer had also sensed when the grass had started to attack them, and though his mouth had been full of dirt and grass, the magic inherent in him had still enabled the undead to somewhat scream his frustration—although no one above had been able to hear.

But then a miracle that Achilios felt certain could be laid at the feet of Uldyssian had happened. First, there had been an incredible heat which had coursed over him without harm but had burned to ash even the roots of the strangling blades. After that, as Achilios had battled to dig himself out, the ground itself had heaved upward as if struck by some great force.

It might have slain a living man, but what it did for the archer was finally lift him above the surface. He had ended up still buried, but cracks of light had hinted that now he was part of some mound or hill—a far more promising situation than at first.

But someone had approached, and, fearing that it might be one of the Prophet's servants, Achilios had done what he could do so well: play dead. The figure had investigated him very briefly, not even bothering to uncover more than part of his arm, and then had moved on.

Yet just when Achilios had deemed it safe to begin digging out, he had heard the struggle between the pair. The voices had helped him identify just who that pair was, and, had it been beating, his heart would have leapt. Achilios knew that Mendeln was skilled at what Rathma had taught him but also that Malic was inhumanly cunning. There had been no doubt in the hunter's mind that Uldyssian's brother would need his aid.

As it turned out, they had ended up needing each other's. Malic could not steal Achilios's dead body, it seemed, but neither could Achilios gain an upper hand against the high priest. He was grateful when Mendeln put an end to their demonic foe but anxious when the black-robed figure had collapsed afterward. Now, as he knelt over him, Achilios prayed that Mendeln had not sacrificed himself in the effort.

There was no sign of mortal injury, but Mendeln refused to stir. In fact, Achilios had to look close just to see that his friend breathed.

The ground shook, and the sounds of desperate battle came at him from every direction. Achilios wanted desperately to rush to Serenthia, but she would never have expected him to abandon Mendeln. He would have been shamed in her eyes, the final blow to his already horrific existence.

But what could he do? Searching around, Achilios spotted the ivory dagger. While the archer had shown no sign in the past, its presence disturbed him greatly. Not only was it in part responsible for him being here, but it also hinted of that place of which he was now a part—what Mendeln and Rathma called the *afterdeath*. Achilios feared that if he touched it, it would somehow cast him into a darkness that would forever cut him off from the woman he loved.

But he also felt that the blade was perhaps the only manner by which he might be able to do *something* for Uldyssian's brother.

Holding a breath he no longer had, Achilios seized the handle. He expected to feel a cold like the grave, but the weapon radiated only a comfortable coolness. Less fearful now, the blond archer brought the weapon to Mendeln and, for lack of any other notion, finally placed the dagger directly on the center of the latter's chest.

The blade flared brightly, startling Achilios so much that he stumbled back. The light spread around Mendeln...and in its illumination, Achilios saw *ghosts*.

These were not merely the specters of dead edyrem or servants of the Prophet, though. Their beauty, their perfection, was extraordinary. Human they looked for the most part—but human in the very same way that Rathma was.

They could only be the children of those who had founded Sanctuary...the first nephalem.

It was only where the light of the dagger shone that he could see them, yet there was just enough to hint that their numbers were greater yet. Achilios understood why they were present. These were those who had perished long ago fighting for the world upon which they had been born, the ones who had first sacrificed themselves for the survival of all their kind and later for the humans descended from them.

The nephalem stared down at Mendeln, and then the pale illumination drew them into the dagger.

Mendeln let out a gasp and sat up. His eyes widened, and he looked to both sides as if expecting to find something. Finally, his gaze fixed on the hunter.

"Achilios! Malic! Is he—"

"Gone to the Burning Hells...I hope."

The ground rocked again. Mendeln struggled to his feet, the dagger now firmly in his grip. "Uldyssian!"

Achilios nodded, although his thoughts were not entirely on Mendeln's older sibling. "Can you...walk?"

"I can run."

"All...the better." He did not wait for Mendeln, certain that the

other would follow right behind him. The hunter had done his part; he had saved his friend. Now he hoped to do the same for the woman he loved, even if it only meant that they would stand together when the world ended.

The landscape was covered in gore, much of it from demons but also too much from the edyrem. Serenthia discovered that she was particularly frustrated with the angels, for they left no sign of their passing and made it look as if only their enemies perished. There should have been *some* remains to mark their dead, something to enable the edyrem to feel that they were standing well against *both* invaders, not just one.

It did not even help that the demons were far more interested in their winged foes than they were in her people, that they only attacked the edyrem because their bloodlust was so strong. She knew that the Triune had sought to make Mankind slave soldiers of the Burning Hells, and thus the bestial warriors should be doing their best to avoid the edyrem, but that simple fact was beyond most of the fiends. She and the rest would be slaughtered just for being in the way.

Of Uldyssian there was no hint. He was invisible to her gifts, and that made her worry that he was dead. Mendeln was also again among the missing, and she could not ask Rathma if he knew anything, for he was also gone. All Serenthia could keep doing was fighting, fighting until some angel or demon chopped her into tiny pieces.

The angels began to press. It was not so much that they suddenly saw the edyrem as a danger but that a fresh horde of demons had arisen behind the humans and the Heavenly Hosts intended to meet them head-on...after they cut through the refuse between the two sides. Serenthia dueled with a female angel wielding a mace. The angel differed little from her male counterparts, save that her general outline was more feminine and what appeared to be hair hung longer. Not certain what was real and what was illusion, Serenthia fought her just as she had all the rest and did not mourn when her lance bore through the angel's breastplate.

Fueled by her powers, the fearsome lance literally shook apart her foe. The armored female finally exploded in a flash of astounding colors and a sharp, keening noise. The angels seemed as much sound and light as substance, and it was only because—like the demons—the edyrem utilized their magic through their weapons that they had any chance against the winged furies.

The host closed, filling her view with their towering, sanctimonious forms. Serenthia found herself battling two, and although it amazed

her that she briefly kept both at bay, her aching arms told her that soon she would fall.

Indeed, as she tried to deflect a sword strike, her right arm faltered. She saw the fiery blade drive toward her—

And, with a scream, Achilios dove in front of her, some massive, shimmering sword likely plucked up from a dead demon gripped in both his hands. He not only deflected the angel's attack but thrust immediately after. With the strange, high-pitched sound that ever marked their doom, the angel exploded in what to Serenthia had previously seemed a breathtaking and colorful display of energy but now just sickened her.

"Get back!" Achilios roared to her. "Get away...from here, Serenthia!"

But now that she suddenly had him with her again, Serenthia had no desire to depart. Instead, she stepped beside him and took on the next foe. "I won't leave you again! I won't!"

"Mendeln! Take her...take her...away!"

Daring to glance back, Serenthia saw Uldyssian's brother far from them. He was trying to join Rathma in forging some spell. From Achilios's call, the two had clearly arrived together but had become separated without the hunter realizing it.

That suited her fine. She was with the man she loved. It was the way Serenthia wanted her life to end.

Achilios was not so pleased, however. "Damn...it, Serenthia! You must...must listen...to me! I'm...begging you! Run!"

"I won't leave you!" she insisted. "I won't—"

Fending off his opponent, Achilios turned to argue with her. At the same time, another angel swooped down unnoticed.

"Nooo!" Visions of the archer dying again urging her on, Serenthia lunged forward. Her spear caught the winged warrior dead-on, the earsplitting sound of the angel's demise almost deafening her.

But in vanquishing Achilios's attacker, Serenthia paid no mind to her own safety. A female angel to her right suddenly veered toward her.

The blazing sword cut across her midsection, opening Serenthia up.

The world fell out of focus. She heard Achilios scream out her name. Serenthia wanted to tell him not to worry about her, to protect himself instead, but the words would not come.

His face appeared before hers, the only thing distinct in her murky view. Smiling, Serenthia put a hand to his cheek...and died.

The level of fury that had enabled Uldyssian to confront Inarius once

more overtook him, yet Tyrael's spell still held. He did not understand why the angel had not simply destroyed him; what was the point of making the son of Diomedes watch his realm be ravaged?

And why had Tyrael left it to the human to bring Inarius down? It could not have been merely to humble the renegade. Uldyssian doubted that such would concern this angel. The way he had spoken of justice precluded that.

Thoughts began to swirl through Uldyssian's head, thoughts that were fueled by his raw emotions as he watched the battle commence—with the edyrem caught between.

The angels and their monstrous adversaries paid no heed to anything between them. The fiends trampled over several humans who did not move quickly enough, while the winged warriors simply cut a swath before them that not only severed heads and limbs of demons but slaughtered innocents in the process. The edyrem did their best against both sides, funneling all their power into their swords, pitchforks, and the like, and then into their opponents, but they were sorely outnumbered.

This is justice? Uldyssian strained to be free. At the very least, he knew that he should be with the others, dying with them.

A demon with three reptilian heads and thick, ursine arms ripped apart an angel who flew too near. The angel did not scatter in bloody pieces but rather exploded in a burst of light that left no trace. That explosion was accompanied by an odd, keening sound that caused shivers through Uldyssian. The demon's victory was short-lived, however, as another angel wielding a lance thrust it through the center head. The creature let out a pair of pained roars from the heads, then turned to ash.

The entire region was dotted by astounding flashes of pure magical energies as both sides utilized their powers in myriad fashions. Uldyssian expected the edyrem to perish quickly, but a strange thing happened. They did not. In fact, those who could gathered together in what was roughly the center of the struggle and did what they could to shield themselves and the rest from the cataclysm taking place.

And there were others with them, others who were not exactly edyrem but who were in some ways much, much more.

Rathma had returned...and not alone.

With him had come several other tall figures either handsome, beautiful, or even grotesque in nature. He recognized only one: Bul-Kathos. The giant warrior stood at the forefront of those protecting the less powerful, the earthen guardian using a huge club to batter away at a horned demon who dared cross his path. The might of the fiend was nothing compared to the Ancient. Bul-Kathos crushed in its chest

with one blow, then battered the thick skull to jelly with another.

Of the rest of Rathma's counterparts, Uldyssian could make out only a sleek warrior woman who fought with more abandon than even Serenthia had ever exhibited. Her hair flying about as if alive, she met the blade of an angel with a black axe. The adversaries exchanged two blows, then the Ancient lunged and cut across the winged figure's breastplate. The armor—if it was such in truth—did nothing to slow her strike.

Like those before him, the angel vanished in a burst of fantastic light and an unsettling—and slightly different—sound.

He could not sense his friends or his brother, and that added to Uldyssian's fears. His body trembled with pent-up emotions and energies.

ACCEPT WHAT MUST BE, Tyrael told him, the angel not sounding sanctimonious like Inarius but rather simply stating a fact. *IT IS INEVITABLE. SURRENDER TO IT....*

But his words had the opposite effect on the son of Diomedes. It was almost as if his captor *needed* to persuade him to surrender.

Uldyssian considered the ways of the Prophet and his constant twisting of facts or his choice evasion of facts. The truth was not entirely the truth where these beings were concerned. They were, in their own way, as manipulative as any demon.

And that, in the end, was the last factor. Uldyssian wondered just how much control Tyrael had over his captivity and how much of it was the human's doubts.

Suddenly, all Uldyssian desired was to be free.

His body shimmered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tyrael react—but, unlike Inarius, all this angel did was step back and watch. The winged being cocked his head and seemed ready to speak, although as he had no mouth, that might have simply been the human's imagination.

Then Tyrael no longer mattered. Uldyssian demanded that the angel's spell be no more...and it vanished. He stood straight, somehow feeling as if he now loomed above Tyrael.

He expected the angel to attack, but Tyrael only stood there watching, almost as if expecting the human's startling escape.

Feeling the winged warrior of no concern to him anymore, Uldyssian turned upon the savage scene and was revolted beyond all possible belief. He saw the dead piling up in great numbers and the futility of the angels' and demons' eternal struggle. He saw that his world would become merely one more battle among thousands, its reason forgotten almost as soon as it ended. No one would mourn Sanctuary. No one...

Uldyssian could not let it end thus. He could not. With every fiber of his being, the son of Diomedes took into himself all the deaths that had happened thus far because of the endless conflict—including all those his crusade had caused—and let them override any hesitation that might make him hold back.

Raising his fists toward the winged host and the fiendish horde, watching as his people continued to be massacred, Uldyssian ul-Diomed quietly spoke.

“Stop it.”

And everyone...everything...froze.

Twenty-Two

There was not a sound, not even the slightest hint of wind. Uldyssian could not even hear his own breathing, nor did he care about that fact. He only knew that he had stopped the bloodshed. He had stopped the devastation.

But that was just the beginning. Angels hung as still as death in the sky. Demons hovered in mid-leap. The edyrem stood steadfast.

Nothing moved...save him, naturally.

His head pounded with the knowledge that he had the power to do what even the Burning Hells or the High Heavens could not. He was more than merely Sanctuary's savior; he was the *god* that Inarius had believed himself.

Uldyssian eyed the combatants. Raising his hands again, this time with the palms open, he willed the angels and demons to be pushed back.

They were, but the effort took more than he expected. Stubborn and certain that the power was within him, Uldyssian fought to gain what he desired. The ground trembled, and even the sky shook as if it were about to crack in two, but the angels and demons were at last separated from his edyrem.

"No more," he thundered to the still figures. "No more."

Uldyssian glanced at the demons. He made a slicing motion with his hand and sent the hordes tumbling back. Demons ten times his height bounced helplessly along the ruined land, bounced until they and all their brethren reached the portals through which they had come.

The son of Diomedes willed them back through those portals, forcing them to return to the Burning Hells. The demons had no choice. Although released from the spell that had frozen them, they now scrambled uselessly for some handhold. Within seconds, the only signs of the horde's presence were the tattered bits of the slaughtered.

And then Uldyssian turned his attention to the angels. However, as he did, he thought he felt a faint voice call out to him from beyond. There was no creature, though, to whom he cared to listen. This was his domain; the interests of any other were nothing to him.

So far from where he stood, the Heavenly Host appeared like nothing more than gnats. Uldyssian could scarcely believe that he had ever been frightened of them. He inhaled, then blew the winged

warriors back through the rip in the sky. A childlike glee filled the onetime farmer as he watched the pristine battle lines jumble together and the angels pass through the tear in tangled heaps.

Uldyssian.

There came the voice again, and this time he recognized it. The dragon, Trag'Oul. Yet, although the being was no enemy of his, the son of Diomedes saw no reason to acknowledge the creature's call. Trag'Oul had failed to protect Sanctuary; he had no more say than anyone else about what Uldyssian would do with his world.

The ground shook once more. Annoyed, Uldyssian demanded that it stop. It did...and then shook anew.

He threw his power into insisting that the tremor cease. This time, all was as it should be.

At that point, Uldyssian turned to face the two remaining angels, but Tyrael was gone. Only Inarius remained.

Ignoring the other angel's abrupt departure, Uldyssian confronted the trapped Prophet. "Your kind called us abominations," the human said. "What do you say now?"

Inarius, though, remained silent—and that left the son of Diomedes more unsettled. Although the renegade angel wore his true form and thus had no discernible expression, at that moment, Uldyssian could have sworn that Inarius was quietly *laughing* at the mortal.

The certainty of this drove Uldyssian to greater fury. The sphere crackled, blue lightning striking inside. Clearly in agony, Inarius fell to his knees...but the sense that he laughed continued.

Uldyssian would have punished him again for his impudence, but a new and more powerful tremor rattled the land for as far as he could sense, reaching even to distant Kehjan and far beyond. He glanced at Inarius but could detect no manner by which the Prophet could have caused it.

Deciding that origin did not matter, Uldyssian focused his power on the new quake and willed it to be gone.

Instead, though, it more than doubled in strength. As that happened, the sky turned a dark crimson, the constantly shifting clouds looking like stirred blood.

He glanced back at Inarius. "What've you done? Tell me!"

The angel finally spoke. *I HAVE DONE NOTHING.*

A huge fissure opened up just to the south. It ran a ragged but steady course toward the capital. Another ripped open to Uldyssian's right.

A third erupted near the edyrem.

Reacting instinctively, Uldyssian used his gifts to force the last fissure to seal. The effort nearly caused him to pass out, and worse,

while he sought to recover, the tremor turned more and more violent. He could feel his followers' growing fear, and although he tried to quiet the land around them, it instead began heaving up and down and ripping apart.

Pulse pounding, Uldyssian threw his will into bringing order, but the opposite again happened. The ground beneath began to collapse. He leapt aside just in time.

As the son of Diomedes watched, what was left of the Cathedral of Light vanished into the depths. Inarius's sphere was swallowed along with it, the captive angel passively staring at Uldyssian as he dropped into the carnage.

Uldyssian stood stunned, unsure of what to do anymore. Sanctuary was coming apart around him—and there was nothing he could do about it. He could not understand *why*, either. With his astounding power, he had routed both the High Heavens and the Burning Hells so easily, yet now some dread force was doing what he had feared would come of their struggle. If not Inarius, though, what was the cause? There was no great magical force that Uldyssian could sense that was capable of all this new calamity.

Battling his own rising fear at the same time as he did the swelling cataclysm, Uldyssian cast a sweeping spell over *all* that existed on Sanctuary. He would have order. He would have the world restored.

Instead, he watched in horror as the grasslands to the south rose high. A shifting mound formed, swelled into a huge, earthen bubble, and then exploded with volcanic fury. In the sky above, the clouds began to spin in an ever-tightening maelstrom that set into motion the first hints of what looked to be a colossal whirlwind. Bolts of blue lightning darted down over the city and the jungle.

And only then did Uldyssian understand that *he* was the reason for all this. Not Inarius. Not the hosts of the High Heavens or the bestial horde of the Burning Hells.

He, Uldyssian ul-Diomed, was responsible for Sanctuary's imminent annihilation.

It was so clear to him now. Uldyssian could feel his heart pounding, his blood racing. It was as if he were two men in one. There was that part of him that still tried to think coherently, that tried to find focus and solutions.

But there was the more primal Uldyssian, the one who had watched loved ones slaughtered and entire lands razed. The one who had been seduced by a demoness, then stripped of his trust in everything because of her. The one who had watched betrayal after betrayal take place when all he had ever wanted was peace for all.

How often in the recent past had he lashed out unthinkingly? How

often had his *power*, not Uldyssian himself, controlled events? Driven by his basest emotions, it had finally grown beyond his conscious control. It now lashed out at Sanctuary, at the world that would not become as he so badly wanted it. It was an unthinking, unfocused eruption of magic, and as such, it could only cause more chaos, more destruction.

And each time he had sought to create order, he had also unwittingly fed into that part of him that was fear, anxiety, anger... every dark emotion. He had been fighting himself—and losing more and more with each attempt.

Uldyssian stood there, unable to react. He wanted to save the world, but already his attempt to do so had unleashed such forces throughout it that he feared to try once more would finally destroy it utterly. Yet if the son of Diomedes did nothing, the same tragic results would take place, regardless.

He felt the edyrem awaiting their terrible end. Kehjan, too, radiated a terrible hopelessness as the city at last took notice of the disaster swiftly approaching it. Uldyssian felt the terror of the jungle dwellers, of the Ascenians, as his own kind were called, and of people in lands far, far away. He sensed both men and beasts preparing for what they were certain was their doom.

If only I'd known sooner! he desperately thought. *If only I'd listened to Mendeln and others, I could have fought it down, buried it deep inside! But now—*

Uldyssian hesitated. Eyes wide, he considered one wild thought. This was *his* power that wrought such devastation. His power. Perhaps there was a way that he *could* control it. He would...

Spurred by the imminency of the situation, Uldyssian tried to draw back into him what he had unleashed. Yet he quickly discovered that once loose, those forces had amplified a thousandfold and more. They were as much a part of the natural forces of Sanctuary now as they were *his*. Even if he drew into himself all that he had sent forth, that would no longer be sufficient to save anything.

But Uldyssian could not turn back. There existed nothing for him but reversing what he had caused. He would take in whatever he had to. He had no choice. He would.

There had been a point when the son of Diomedes had wondered if, ultimately, there was no end to the potential of his edyrem gifts. Now he prayed that, if there was an end, it would be just enough to accomplish this epic feat.

Bracing himself and taking a deep breath, Uldyssian began willing the wild forces to return.

He cried out as the first wave coursed into him, for it burned hotter

than fire. Yet Uldyssian imagined his brother, imagined Serenthia and Achilios and all those who had faithfully followed him. With their faces in his head, he demanded that his will be done. Nothing else mattered, either consciously or subconsciously.

His body already blazed a brilliant gold and grew yet more blinding as Uldyssian absorbed into himself all that fueled Sanctuary's end. The area surrounding him radiated powerful amounts of magical energy, all of it heading toward the human. Caught up in the flow of such staggering forces, huge rocks, fragments of wood, and much, much more spun in the air surrounding him.

Uldyssian paid them no mind. Nothing existed for him but to complete what he had started. He saw only the continual rush of magic into not only his body but his very soul. Each moment, the former farmer was certain that he could take no more, and yet he continued to stand, suffering a thousand punishments a thousand times over, each worse than any ever inflicted on a single being.

Faintly, he heard voices, but certain that they were the screams of the dying, Uldyssian fought to ignore them. He could not be distracted. Everything he had needed to be concentrated purely on fulfilling his last hope.

It kept coming. Uldyssian screamed but still managed to hold on. He prayed that when at last he finally faltered, at least he would have somehow saved a few people.

It continued to flow into him like a raging river of molten earth. He went down to his knees but still held on. Yet the flow was also relentless. It kept coming and coming and coming...

Then—

It ceased.

Certain that something had gone awry, Uldyssian continued to try to draw more into him, but nothing else came.

He all but sobbed at this miracle—not for himself, though, but because it meant hope for the others. However, it was far from over. Uldyssian felt everything he had taken in straining to be rereleased. It was all he could do to keep it trapped, and how long that would last, the son of Diomedes could not say.

There came a point of clarity then, an acknowledgment of what it would take to end the threat. Uldyssian found that he had no difficulty with what had to be, for it was not just the only choice but the right choice.

He stood. Shining brighter than the sun and looking far more than human, the son of Diomedes gazed around at all that was his world. Uldyssian admired the rivers, forests, mountains, and seas. He surveyed the many peoples of Sanctuary and marveled at the

diversity. More astonishing, like him, they all had the same potential, the same possible greatness.

But the trouble, in Uldyssian's case, in the case of all his followers, was that it had come too soon. Humanity—and he, in particular—had been thrust too fast into their destiny. That had been Lilith's doing, the demoness too impatient to let the centuries lead men in the same direction. Uldyssian had not been given the opportunity to mature properly into his gifts.

It was too soon for a being such as Uldyssian had nearly become. Too soon...

You understand....

Uldyssian knew who spoke. *Trag'Oul?*

I have been trying to touch your mind...but it has been overwhelming, the dragon admitted. The celestial sounded weak but pleased. *I knew you would succeed.*

No...not until it—I—no longer threaten Sanctuary!

He sensed the dragon's concurrence. *I can show you where it can be unleashed, but it is you who must pay.*

I don't care! Show me!

Trag'Oul did, and Uldyssian gazed in wonder at what the creature revealed. *Then...that...*

Yes was all Trag'Oul needed to reply.

Uldyssian smiled, his concerns all fading away. He raised his hands to the sky. *Is that all I have to do? Just will it to happen?*

The choice is yours. It always has been.

Uldyssian felt the dragon recede. He was no longer needed for what the human had to do.

The son of Diomedes used his powers to gaze one last time at those dearest to him—Mendeln, Achilios, and Serenthia. There were two things that he had to do before he continued. With what he could safely command, Uldyssian set about making things right for his brother and friends.

That finished, Uldyssian looked up, but he stared not at the sky. Instead, he gazed far beyond, to that place and time the dragon had revealed to him.

Within, the fury that he kept imprisoned struggled to be free.

It was time. Uldyssian smiled once more—and began to send it forth. The light that erupted shone across the grasslands, across the jungles, across all of Sanctuary. Yet it did not harm, but rather soothed. It touched all living things and made certain they were healed of whatever ill the coming of the edyrem and the near destruction of the world might have caused them.

Uldyssian then drew it together again and let it pour out into the

beyond, where it spilled in all directions. He felt the pressure building up again—this time for the final moment—and readied himself and his world for it.

And when it came, it did so with an explosion of pure energy that ever so briefly shook Sanctuary to its foundations. Uldyssian roared, not because of pain but rather the sheer ecstasy of his transformation. He was no longer a mere human but something of which even the angels and demons could not conceive. He *was* Sanctuary for one moment, and all that surrounded it. His presence dwarfed that of Trag'Oul...of any being near. His consciousness spread out above his treasured world, where he looked at it one last time.

Then, finishing what had to be done, what he desired to be done, Uldyssian ul-Diomed let himself scatter throughout *all*, his passing from the mortal plane marked for those below by a fiery yet arresting flash of light that did not frighten but rather gladdened.

And forever, whether any knew it or not, would change the world of Sanctuary.

Mendeln was the first to realize that something was amiss. In fact, it was so obvious to him that he was surprised people were not screaming.

The grasslands had been completely restored. Brown and green blades waved gently in a slight breeze. Mendeln cautiously surveyed the area with his dagger and found no malice in the plants.

But he did find something else, the reason for the edyrem's quiet. They were all as still as statues.

No, not all of them. There were two figures moving toward him, two welcome—and startling—figures.

Achilios and Serenthia—and both looking very much among the living.

They stared at him with equal wonder, clearly as mystified not only about what had happened to their surroundings but also themselves. Mendeln was certain of the cause of the latter, at least.

“Uldyssian,” he told them, his voice shaking. “Uldyssian did it.”

“But how can that be possible?” the archer asked, unable to cease smiling. He was the Achilios they had all known so well, even the torn gap in his throat gone. “How?”

“That is a question that even they are debating heavily,” answered the voice of Rathma.

They turned to find the Ancient looking more haggard, more his centuries-old age. His hair had gray in it, and lines coursed his once-youthful visage. In contrast to the trio, Rathma did not look at all

cheerful.

And when they followed his outthrust finger, they saw why.

Five there were of the towering, winged figures, five who radiated such might as to make the host that had flown down into Sanctuary look like children.

“The Angiris Council,” Inarius’s son breathed. “They can be no other. My father spoke of them. The Council has come to our world.”

Mendeln shivered at such a sight. “But why?”

The Ancient glared at the newcomers. “As we are the only ones unfrozen, it behooves us to find out.”

He led them toward the angels, who stood in a half-circle. As the four approached, Mendeln began to hear—and feel—their voices.

And even more astounding, the landscape abruptly shifted. It became a grand chamber of gleaming crystal and diamond carved with a perfection that no human artisan could reproduce. Gigantic statues of other winged champions loomed over the interior. The floor was composed of the most intricate of marble mosaics, with patterns that made no sense to Mendeln but were utterly beautiful and very difficult from which to tear his eyes.

But no less beautiful—and terrifying—were the five themselves.

THERE IS NO NEED FOR THIS DEBATE TO CONTINUE.... OR TO HAVE EVEN BEGUN, declared a majestic angel with robes of royal red and a shining breastplate upon which the image of an upturned sword blazed. *THE PATH IS OBVIOUS.... WHAT HAS BEEN WROUGHT BY THE TRAITOR MUST BE UNDONE! LET THE HOST FINISH WHAT IT BEGAN, EVEN IF WE MUST CUT THROUGH A HUNDRED RANKS OF DEMONS TO ACCOMPLISH IT!*

SHOULD WE NOT DEAL WITH THE RENEGADE FIRST, IMPERIUS? asked one whose robes were a softer blue and who seemed, as angels appeared, a female. *AND LEAVE THIS MATTER FOR ITS OWN TIME?*

THE MATTERS ARE ONE AND THE SAME, the first retorted. One gloved hand thrust to the area between them, and suddenly Inarius—shackled by black streaks of energy—kneled in the midst of the Angiris Council. *FROM HIS CRIMES WAS THIS ABOMINATION CALLED SANCTUARY CREATED! JUDGE ONE, AND YOU RIGHTLY JUDGE BOTH, AURIEL!*

The female angel refused this argument. She was the most animated of the five, turning her head to each of the other four as she spoke. *YOU HAVE ALL SEEN MORE THAN ENOUGH EVIDENCE THAT THESE CHILDREN OF THAT ORIGINAL CRIME ARE NOT THEIR PARENTS... AND NOT THE ABOMINATIONS THAT WE FIRST BELIEVED THEM.*

“Where are we?” Serenthia suddenly whispered.

Rathma signaled her to be silent but then quietly replied, “We are

both in the grasslands where we stood and in what, from the stories I know, must be the central meeting chamber of the Council in the legendary Silver City itself! The Council is judging our world, and I fear the verdict may yet go against us.”

Mendeln was shocked. “After all that Uldyssian did, the outcome is still in doubt?” Before he realized just what he was doing, he marched among the angels. “What right have you? What audacity! We are not vermin to be slaughtered!”

Imperius gazed down at him. *AND YOU ARE NOT ANGELS, WITH THE RIGHT TO STAND BEFORE THE COUNCIL.*

Mendeln was thrust back by an unseen force. He might have crashed into the others, but Auriel glanced at him, and he settled softly to the ground.

AND IS SUCH ARROGANCE NOW VIRTUE? she asked of her counterpart. *THESE ARE HERE AT MY BEHEST AND BECAUSE THEY HAVE EARNED, THANKS TO THEIR COMPANION, THE RIGHT TO LISTEN TO WHATEVER THE FATE OF THEIR HOME.*

Imperius did not reply, but if he had had a face, Mendeln felt certain that it would have glowered.

Rathma next stepped to the forefront. “You must give humanity a chance. They are capable of many wondrous things, if you will but let them survive! They have the possibility of truly becoming an integral part of the Balance—”

I SAY IT IS TIME TO VOTE, Imperius rumbled, utterly ignoring him.

LET IT BE SO, interjected a gray-clad angel who seemed neither male nor female in aspect. *LET THIS BE DONE.*

IT IS SECONDED! the first angel boomed triumphantly. *WE BEGIN, THEN! I SAY THAT THE RENEGADE MUST BE FOREVER IMPRISONED AND HIS NEST OF DEMON-SPAWN ERADICATED!* Imperius stretched out a fist and turned it downward.

Mendeln started to speak again, then saw the futility of it. The angels would pay no mind.

Auriel was quick to react to Imperius’s vote. She turned her fist upward, then added, *LET THEIR POTENTIAL BE DEVELOPED...FOR IN THEM I THINK THERE IS A CHANCE THAT WE MAY SEE THE END OF OUR STRUGGLE AT LAST!* The female angel looked to a fourth member of their council, a very gaunt figure whose robes were black and whose breastplate was likewise colored. *WHAT SAY YOU, MALTHAEL? WILL YOU STAND WITH ME ON THIS?*

A visible shiver ran through not only Mendeln but also the rest when the angel Malthael spoke. His voice brought nightmares of death to Mendeln—a permanent, empty death.

WHATEVER THE CHOICE, IN THE END IT DOES NOT MATTER FOR

ME.... I ABSTAIN.

Auriel leaned back in clear disappointment. Imperius, on the other hand, appeared satisfied. It was he who spoke to the next, the gray-clad one who had previously spoken. *ITHERAEL, WHAT VERDICT DO YOU GIVE?*

There was a pause, as if the fourth angel considered hard this question. *THEY ARE THE GET OF ANGELS AND DEMONS, WITH THE TAINT AND PROMISE INHERENT.... LEFT TO GROW, THEY MIGHT BECOME MORE MONSTROUS THAN ANYTHING RISING FROM THE BURNING HELLS.*

AND SO THEY MUST BE DESTROYED! Imperius insisted.

Ittherael raised a finger. *BUT THEY ALSO HAVE THE GREATEST POTENTIAL TO SERVE THE LIGHT...A POTENTIAL THAT COULD SURPASS OUR OWN ROLES...AND SO I VOTE THAT THEY BE GIVEN THEIR CHANCE.*

Mendeln's hopes rose. The angels were at a stalemate. Even if Tyrael—certainly no friend of the humans—did as was likely and voted against them, it would end up a tie. Sanctuary would survive.

The four angels looked at the last. Tyrael had been staring at Inarius's bound form as if in constant thought.

WELL, OLD FRIEND? asked Imperius. *HOW WILL YOU CHOOSE, YOU WHO HAVE SEEN THEM AT THEIR MOST FOUL? WILL YOU VOTE WITH ME AND PUT AN END TO THIS MOST HEINOUS OF SPAWNING GROUNDS?*

"What does he mean by that?" Uldyssian's brother blurted. "The vote would be tied!"

Rathma wore a sorrowful expression. "An equal vote, it seems, means no decision in our favor and, thus, no reason to let us live."

Mendeln could not stand for it. Once more, he dared step forward. "How can you so casually condemn us? You claim to be servants of the Light, yet you callously execute what you deem not worthy! My brother could have destroyed you all, but he did not. All he wanted to do was save his home and his people, even though it cost him his life."

Imperius looked prepared again to remove what he obviously considered an annoyance from his sight, but Tyrael spoke, his tone demanding the attention of all.

THIS WAR HAS GONE ON SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, AND THERE IS NOT ONE OF US WHO HAS NOT GROWN WEARY...YET EVER DO WE ANSWER THE CALL TO BATTLE.

The other winged guardians nodded.

Pointing at Inarius, Tyrael continued, *THIS RENEGADE DID LEAD OTHERS INTO THE CREATION OF WHAT SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN, WHAT NEVER SHOULD HAVE BEEN! HE CAUSED THE*

UNTHINKABLE, AND IF I HAD BEEN THERE, I WOULD HAVE FOUGHT ALL TO PREVENT IT...

They were doomed. Mendeln saw that. His only hope now was Trag'Oul. Surely the dragon could do something. Mendeln tried to reach out to the creature but could find no trace.

BUT I WAS NOT THERE...AS WERE NONE OF YOU, Tyrael reminded his counterparts. *AND SO THIS THING GREW...AND GREW...UNTIL IT BECAME WHAT NONE COULD FATHOM, WHAT NONE COULD HAVE EXPECTED! THIS PLACE CALLED SANCTUARY HAS BROUGHT FORTH SUCH AS WE HAVE NEVER WITNESSED, THINGS I MYSELF CALLED ABOMINATIONS!* Before Imperius could interrupt, Tyrael pressed, *BUT ABOMINATIONS DO NOT FEEL SUFFERING, THEY DO NOT STRUGGLE FOR ONE ANOTHER AGAINST GREAT ODDS AND THEY DO NOT...THEY DO NOT...OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL...CHOOSE...YES...CHOOSE TO COMMIT SUCH GREAT SACRIFICE FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS.*

Mendeln felt the hope rising among his companions, even the generally dour Rathma. Was it possible of Tyrael, of all the angels?

WE SACRIFICE, responded Imperius. *OF WHAT DIFFERENCE WAS HIS?*

WE SACRIFICE BECAUSE WE MUST...BECAUSE IT IS PART OF OUR CALLING! WE DO IT BECAUSE IT IS OUR DUTY AND NO MORE! THE MORTAL, ULDYSSIAN UL-DIOMED...HE CHOSE TO SELFLESSLY GIVE HIMSELF BECAUSE HE CARED FOR HIS COMPANIONS! IT WAS NOT HIS DUTY...BUT HIS DESIRE. Tyrael looked at each of the other judges, ending with Imperius. *I DID CALL THEM ABOMINATIONS... AND I WAS WRONG! MY VOTE IS FOR THEM...FOR I WOULD SEE WHAT THEY MIGHT BECOME...AND MARVEL IN IT.*

It was only by the strongest of efforts that the humans held their relief inside. Mendeln's cheer was tempered by the fact that the five still acted as if the matter was not at an end.

SO IT IS DECIDED, Imperius declared with a slight hint of bitterness unbecoming an angel. *BUT WHAT DO ANY OF YOU NOW SUGGEST BE DONE TO PREVENT THE BURNING HELLS FROM SPREADING THEIR TAINT ACROSS THIS WORLD YOU HAVE SAVED? ARE WE TO HAVE A HOST STAND GUARD OVER THIS...THIS SANCTUARY?*

He no sooner asked this than a deep, bloodcurdling chuckle caused all to look around. Imperius summoned a sword of fire.

"This is a *peaceful* visit, oh, councilors," rasped a voice like a nest of angry vipers. "Peaceful—if you would have it so."

A shadow crossed them then, a shadow of such darkness as Mendeln had never witnessed. With it came a sense of evil that reminded Uldyssian's brother of another...*Lilith*.

YOU OFFER PARLEY...LORD MEPHISTO? Auriel asked the shadow.
YOU...NOT YOUR BROTHER?

The shadow coalesced somewhat into a tall, macabre shape that instantly brought to Mendeln's mind the monstrous morlu or, worse yet, their heinous master, Lucion, who, like Lilith, was also offspring of this sudden and dread visitor.

"My dear brother is beside himself. Therefore, I, who am also supreme, do indeed offer parley—and more! I offer...a truce." Although Mephisto remained mostly hidden in shadow as Uldyssian had said his brother Diablo had done, what was evident was still more than enough to set Mendeln's nerves on edge. "A pact that shall relieve the situation *this one* brought upon us."

A green, scaly hand thrust forth from the shadow to condemn Inarius. The renegade flared bright in defiance.

Imperius took over the situation from Auriel. *WHAT PACT IS THIS THAT YOU PROPOSE?*

A hint of great, sharp teeth momentarily flashed into sight where the demon's head should have been. "We, like you, made false assumptions about this place, false assumptions about the creatures spawned by both our kind."

A blazing red eye materialized, then winked in the direction of Auriel, who utterly ignored it.

With a chuckle, Mephisto added, "But Sanctuary is much more than we envisioned! All you said is true, and we would let it grow and see where it leads, good or ill, untouched by either side."

AND WE SHOULD TRUST THE WORD OF YOU, mocked Imperius.

"This world cost me my children, both who sought its survival. I would also have it grow for their sakes."

To Mendeln, at least, the unsettling thing about the demon lord's answer was that he *believed* Mephisto. Believed him in part, that is. Certainly, the only reason Lucion and Lilith had tried to preserve Sanctuary and humanity was so that it could serve the Burning Hells.

But even believing the demon a little was unnerving. It showed the subtle influence of Mephisto's tremendous power.

The angels were clearly not very trusting of the intruder, but Tyrael suddenly stepped beside Imperius.

IF YOU WOULD WISH A TRUCE, LORD DEMON... WOULD YOU CAST YOUR MARK ON A PLACE CHOSEN BY ME?

Mephisto seemed to hesitate. "Show me, and it shall be done—but only if something is in turn given to me by right of the aspect of justice you champion."

The angels glanced at one another. Imperius nodded to Tyrael.

SPEAK WHAT IT IS, the latter said to the shadowed form.

Again, the taloned hand thrust forth—at the prisoner. “Him...let he whose crimes are already legion among you now be cast to me to pay for my loss—and the sealing of the truce, as it happens.”

Inarius did an odd thing upon hearing this. He laughed. He laughed loudly until Imperius, with a contemptuous wave of his hand, caused all sound from the captive to cease.

IF IT IS AGREED, YOU WILL CAST YOUR MARK? asked the haughty angel.

“Before the eyes of all—and even these,” Lord Mephisto concluded, his red orb shifting around to survey Mendeln’s group.

Even as the demon proclaimed this, the chamber faded, and once more they stood on Sanctuary, but in a slightly different location. The rubble of the Cathedral of Light surrounded them.

“The humor of angels,” Mephisto mocked.

Imperius pointed at the center of what Mendeln realized was the great chamber where the Prophet had likely preached to the masses. *THERE RESTS A POINT OF FLUX! A POINT WHERE THIS WORLD WAS SEALED TOGETHER...YOUR MARK.*

Uldyssian’s brother expected to watch the demon lord draw some symbol in fire, but instead, Mephisto raised his hand to where the teeth glinted, then bit deep into his own limb.

A black substance oozed from the bite, and this the demon let drip onto the spot the angels had chosen. As it touched, there was a searing sound, and several red runes suddenly materialized above the stain. They turned twice in a circle, then sank into what passed for Mephisto’s blood. The black substance melted into the floor, vanishing.

Of the wound, there was also no more trace. Mephisto withdrew the hand into the shadow. “And now...him, yes?”

The Angiris Council looked down as one at Inarius, who refused to cease laughing madly.

YOU HAVE BROUGHT THIS UPON YOURSELF, BROTHER... declared Tyrael.

From out of the shadow burst a score of inky tendrils. They wrapped eagerly around the renegade angel. Without effort, they dragged him back into the darkness with them.

His voice seeping with satisfaction, Mephisto murmured, “And the cavern and the find within?”

Imperius shifted as if angry. Tyrael replied, *FOR WHAT SHALL BE NEEDED TO BE DONE THERE, ANOTHER PACT MUST BE MADE.*

“Agreed.” The orb shifted yet again to the humans and Rathma. “And now?”

Achilios reached for his knife. Serenthia gripped her spear, and

even Mendeln sought his dagger. Rathma did nothing.

It was Auriel who interjected. *FOR HIS SACRIFICE, THEY SHOULD ALL BE ALLOWED TO REMEMBER.*

THAT WILL NOT DO, Imperius declared.

“No,” agreed Mephisto, who seemed to take relish in watching Imperius’s reaction when the angel realized that the pair agreed with each other. “That firstborn,” he added, meaning Rathma, “and his kind...they may remember, for they are few, and their day is already over. The rest, though...if they are to grow, they must begin at the beginning.”

From the background, Itherael responded, *HE IS CORRECT.*

Auriel wished to argue, but her comrades were clearly as one on this.

THEY SHALL BEGIN ANEW, agreed Tyrael.

“They plan to make us forget everything!” Serenthia gasped. “They plan to wipe our powers and Uldyssian’s memory from us!”

“You can’t do this!” Achilios added.

Mendeln only clutched the dagger, awaiting what he knew he and his friends could not stop. Yet in his head, he pictured his brother, all the while repeating Uldyssian’s name.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING, Tyrael reiterated. *AND FROM THERE, WE SHALL LEAVE THEM TO THEIR OWN DESTINY, WHETHER GOOD OR ILL, FOR AS LONG AS THE TRUCE HOLDS.*

“For as long as it holds,” Mephisto repeated.

Mendeln jerked, his desire to preserve Uldyssian’s memory distracted by the demon lord. Mephisto already plotted to abuse the pact. If he did that—

Before Mendeln could react any further, Tyrael raised his palm toward the three humans.

HE WILL BE REMEMBERED, the Angel of Justice told them...but Mendeln in particular. *HE WILL BE REMEMBERED.*

A breathtaking white light enveloped them.

Twenty-Three

The plague had been a terrible one, taking as it had Serenthia's father and several others, including missionaries from some nameless sect. Rumors brought by travelers who had passed through a larger town called Partha indicated that the inhabitants there had been particularly struck hard, with at least half the population dead and burned. Other regions appeared more fortunate, and from what the village elders gathered, the crisis appeared to be over.

Mendeln approached the trading station just in time to catch Achilios arriving with a batch of hares his expert marksmanship had caught for him. The hunter started to smile, but the smile faltered when he saw both the horse his friend rode and the packed mule behind it.

"You said you were going to do it...and you meant it, evidently."

"Yes. The farm is sold, and all I have is with me." Mendeln glanced past him to where a tall, burly young man was being castigated by Serenthia. As capable as her brothers were, it still fell to Cyrus's daughter to keep them in line.

She turned from reprimanding her sibling and saw the two men. As she ran toward them, the raven-haired woman's countenance took on an expression much akin to that on her new husband's.

"You're leaving! Oh, Mendeln, you can't!"

He steeled himself. "With Uldyssian dead from plague, I have no more desire for the farm...and the memories are too strong for me to stay anywhere in Seram."

Serenthia shed a tear but nodded. Achilios lowered his catch and put an arm around her shoulder.

"Send us word when you can," Achilios muttered, well aware that they likely would never hear from him again. The world was vast and, beyond a few days' travel, contact between Seram and the outside was nearly impossible.

"I will do my best," Mendeln responded with a nod. He did not bother dismounting, wanting to be away before his nerves broke.

Serenthia came to his side and took his hand, Achilios following her.

"May your lives be simple and happy ones," Uldyssian's brother added.

Achilios chuckled. "Here in Seram, the simple part is guaranteed!"

Again he hugged his new wife. "And, in my case, so will be the happy!"

She kissed the archer lightly, then the two of them shook hands one last time with Mendeln. The son of Diomedes turned his horse toward the woods.

"Going through the old hunter's path?" asked Achilios.

"Yes...with Partha so terribly hit, I would prefer to stay clear no matter what they say about the plague no longer a threat."

"Wise. Fare you well, then!"

"I shall try."

The couple waved as he started off. Mendeln kept his eye on them for as long as he could...and when that was no more possible, he urged the horse and mule to the best pace of which they were capable.

The hunter's path was an old trail that faded to thick woods about half a mile from Seram. Achilios assumed that Mendeln would do the logical and veer south when that happened, for east and north were too complicated for his animals to navigate. However, the moment he reached the trail's end, Mendeln instead reined the horse to a halt and paused to stare at the trees ahead.

After a moment's reflection, he reached into his travel cloak and pulled out the ivory dagger.

"I am already here."

Looking over his shoulder, Uldyssian's brother found Rathma standing atop a fallen tree trunk. The cowed figure still had the graying hair and age lines earned during the battle, but his demeanor was more as Mendeln knew it.

"Thank you for leaving me my memory," he told the Ancient.

"That was beyond my ability. Trag did that."

Mendeln nodded. "He is well?"

"It still galls him that he had to shield his presence while the angels and demons discussed Sanctuary's end, but that is all. He is recovered from initially trying to steer the host away from the world, yes. He also regrets your loss but honors Uldyssian's choice...as do I."

Clutching the dagger tight, Mendeln muttered, "I saw it, Rathma. He let me. I saw him give all that he held and all that he was into that beyond Sanctuary! I saw that he was happy in the end, because he knew that he had become part of something—something wonderful. I'm sorry that I cannot explain better, but I understand no more of it than that!"

Rathma stepped down from the trunk. "Do not worry. I know what it is as little as you do. Trag understands far more, but apparently even I am not ready to be told. We shall both learn together, eh?"

And that you shall, came the dragon's voice. *That you shall, Mendeln*

ul-Diomed.

Mendeln shook his head. "I am tired of myself. I died when the last of my family died. I died when Uldyssian did. Call me anything else, but no longer call me that."

Rathma looked perturbed. "Mendeln—"

It is his wish...in fact, if he so desires another name, I have one I hope is worthy of him.

Despite himself, Mendeln was intrigued. After all, the dragon had renamed Inarius's and Lilith's son from Linarian to Rathma. "What?"

I would call you Kalan. In the tongue of that of which I am, it means teacher, for you have risen far too high to be called by me a mere student...and we have need of you to show others the truth of the Balance.

Mendeln did not know what to say. In many ways, he felt it a path by which to give honor to Uldyssian and also protect his world from the treachery of demons...and angels.

"There must be more who will fight to maintain the Balance," Rathma said to him. "The Balance is Sanctuary's best hope. When that day comes that the edyrem return, they must not fall into either camp, for then humanity will merely be an appendage of one side or another, dying for their causes and nothing else. Keep humanity balanced between the two, and it becomes the master of its own destiny."

As is the intention...

Both men glanced up at the sky.

"What do you mean by that, Trag?" Rathma asked, looking as confused as Mendeln.

But the dragon did not answer. At last, Rathma turned again to Uldyssian's brother. "There is a bit more to show you. The jungles of Kehjan are rich in the magical forces that will best encourage both your learning and the learning of your students. Trag will bring us there."

"And then?"

"And then I prepare you for when I am gone. The day of the nephalem is, as *they* said, long over. One by one, I and my kind will cease to be. There are fewer now than during the battle even." He waved off any question concerning the others like him. "The future is what is important. You will need to teach as many as will listen. The three among the edyrem whom you began with shall be gathered first, though they will not recall the time before. That is your burden alone."

We can speak more of this when he is settled and ready, Trag'Oul suddenly said.

Rathma grimaced slightly. "Then, if you are so impatient, eternal

one, it would be best if you brought us there as soon as possible.” To the son of Diomedes, the Ancient added, “What you need shall come also. The animals will be back among your friends’ mounts, the change unnoticed by any.”

“Just like so much.”

The cowed figure grunted. “There was nothing that could be done at the time...but the future will be different. We shall see to that.”

But the past could *not* be forgotten. Mendeln—no, *Kalan*—was determined to see to that. Already he had plans to mark down on both parchment and stone all that he could recall, if only for the sake of those who followed in his path. The world could not forget the lesson of Uldyssian and the hope that his sacrifice had gained for all.

“Let’s be off,” he suddenly demanded of the dragon. “The sooner I start, the better.”

From Rathma, he earned a rare grin. From Trag’Oul, there was a sense of hope.

Prepare yourself, the dragon warned.

Kalan tightened his grip on the dagger more, but his mind was not on the spell with which Trag’Oul would magically cast him hundreds of miles distant. It was instead on Uldyssian.

You have given us a chance for a future, brother...and come the High Heavens or the Burning Hells, we shall work to make certain that we are its makers and no others.

And as he thought that, as the woods around him faded, Kalan believed he glimpsed a figure built much like a farmer but who was obviously so much more. The figure was not even there for the blink of an eye and was likely only Kalan’s imagination, but even so, it raised the brother’s hopes.

The edyrem would rise again—and with the sacrifice of Uldyssian to guide them, next time as their *own* masters.

About the Author

Richard A. Knaak is the *New York Times* bestselling author of some three dozen novels, including the *War of the Ancients* trilogy for *Warcraft* and the *Legend of Huma* for *Dragonlance*. No stranger to the *Diablo* world, in addition to this, the third in his *Sin War* saga, he has penned three stand-alone novels, including *Moon of the Spider*. His other works include his own *Dragonrealm* series, the *Minotaur Wars* for *Dragonlance*, the *Aquilonia* trilogy of the *Age of Conan*, and the *Sunwell Trilogy*—the first *Warcraft* manga. In addition, his novels and short stories have been published worldwide in such diverse places as China, Iceland, the Czech Republic, and Brazil.

Currently, the author is at work on several projects, including a sequel to *Day of the Dragon* for *Warcraft*, a second manga set, the *Ogre Titans* trilogy for *Dragonlance*, and more. Besides *The Veiled Prophet*, his most recent releases include background storywork for a recent game release by D3P and *The Black Talon*, first of the *Ogre Titans* novels. He looks forward to continuing to return to Sanctuary and Azeroth in future stories.

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